

A Mixed-Methods Study of the Reasons Why Nontraditional Students Have Chosen to Attend
College at a Later Point in Their Lives

by

Jeffrey S. Vance

M.A., Southern New Hampshire University 2013

M.S., University of New Haven 2008

B.A., Saint Joseph's College 2002

Chair

Patricia Smedley Buxton, Ed.D.

Reader

Linda Paslov, Ed.D.

Reader

Niralee Patel-Lye, Ed.D.

Director, School of Education

Allen Cook, Ph.D.

Dean, College of Engineering, Business, and Education

Terek Sobh, Ph.D.

DISSERTATION

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University of Bridgeport

Committee Approval of a Dissertation

**A Mixed-Methods Study of the Reasons Why Nontraditional Students Have Chosen to
Attend College at a Later Point in Their Lives**

Submitted by:

Jeffrey S. Vance, Ed. D.

I have read this dissertation and have found it to be of satisfactory qualify for a doctoral degree.

12/4/2018
Date

Patricia Smedley Buxton, Ed.D.
Patricia Smedley Buxton, Ed.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

I have read this dissertation and have found it to be of satisfactory qualify for a doctoral degree.

12/4/2018
Date

Linda Paslov, Ed.D.
Linda Paslov, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

I have read this dissertation and have found it to be of satisfactory qualify for a doctoral degree.

12/4/2018
Date

Niralee Patel-Lye, Ed.D.
Niralee Patel-Lye, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Approval:

Director: MPW Date: 12-4-2018

Dean: J. Sobh Date: 12/5/18

ABSTRACT

The overall enrollment of nontraditional students at institutions of higher education has illustrated a significant increase over the past twenty years. This created a need to study such a phenomenon. Love of learning, financial considerations and internal provisions were a few of the factors provided by nontraditional learners as the reasons they enrolled in college at a later point in their lives. Conversely, factors such as financial concerns, self-esteem, and technological unfamiliarity were studied as factors that connected to reasons why they did not apply to college at an earlier point in their lives.

This study utilized a mixed-methods case study design that analyzed the aforementioned factors as they related to ten nontraditional students in Southern New England. The researcher utilized interviews and surveys to gather relevant pieces of data. The research questions were the following: 1) What factors draw nontraditional students towards applying to college? 2) What factors draw nontraditional students away from applying to college?

The data revealed that financial considerations were the primary reason nontraditional learners attend college. Nontraditional students wanted to learn new skills and cognitive methods in order to attain financial success. The factors in opposition exemplified managing work and familial responsibilities as some of the reasons why nontraditional students did not apply to college at an earlier point in their lives.

Recommendations for educational leaders included revisiting or drafting plans that might help to make the overall college experience more effective for nontraditional learners. This would include social and financial considerations.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family whose help and support constantly motivated me throughout this process. My mother, Susan, often called to check in on me with words of encouragement. My father, Robert, would always tell me to never give up on my dreams and goals in life. On their frequent Sunday visits to my home, my parents would always ask questions about my research and guided me to think in unique directions. Finally, I dedicate this piece to my brother, Robert Jr., who also supported my academic work over the years. My brother would always remind me of how important it was to believe in myself and try to jump over any hurdles in my path. I would have never been able to come to the end of this journey without their concern, support, and love.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This study examined why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. Specifically, the investigation examined the factors that pull nontraditional students towards applying for college and the factors that push them away from applying. By understanding these factors, institutions of higher education will be better equipped to serve this population of student.

For centuries, human beings have attempted to consider why and how people learn. More recently, within the past century, educational researchers have posited many ideas and considerations that specifically deal with nontraditional students at the college/ postsecondary education level (Baptista, 2011; Kasworm, 2005; Munro, 2011). A nontraditional student is an individual who is at least 24 years old and currently taking undergraduate course work (Ritt, 2008). However, some studies have utilized different age benchmarks to determine nontraditional student status. For the purpose of this study, a nontraditional learner was defined as one who is at least 24 years of age and taking undergraduate courses (Kudak, 2016). In addition to the research, it is evidenced that many nontraditional students are returning to the classroom in ever-increasing numbers. (Jackson, 2009). Recent research shows, by the year 2022, over 10 million college students will be over the age of 24 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Factors such as financial concerns, increased employment opportunities, and love of learning are some of the many reasons why this group is enrolling in college at a higher rate (Laher, 2007). As a result of this increase, it is essential for stakeholders in higher education to be aware of what factors are associated with this increase in enrollment. This is important because colleges need to know what factors are specifically propelling nontraditional students to enroll in college to improve enrollment outreach efforts. Moreover, by identifying what pushed the nontraditional

students away attending initially, colleges and universities would be able to work on alleviating those factors in their institutional marketing efforts.

While some research has been done with regard to nontraditional learners, little is written on the major factors that draw nontraditional learners to apply to college or those which held nontraditional learners back earlier on in their lives (Barr, 2016; Kudak, 2016; Ruff, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight important information into this mixed-methods multi-case study to examine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. The study's problem statement, theoretical underpinnings, deficiencies in the literature, operational definitions, research questions, and design and significance will be discussed on the following pages.

Statement of the Problem

A recent study revealed that over 8.1 million undergraduate students are at least age 24 or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In fact, since the 1990s the rate of nontraditional students attending college has increased almost thirty percent (Kasworm, 2005). This revelation exposes the fact that colleges and universities need to be prepared for the unique challenges and needs that this population requires. The uniqueness does not stem merely from age alone; the familial responsibilities, work-related concerns, and underlying technological unfamiliarity are often factors that play a major role in the decision to attend, or not to attend, post-secondary education (Laher, 2007). While some research has been undertaken with regard to nontraditional learners, little is written on the major factors that drew nontraditional learners to apply to college or those which held nontraditional learners back earlier on in their lives (Barr, 2016; Kudak, 2016; Ruff, 2011).

The problem under investigation is revealed through the following: What can be better understood about situations that impact nontraditional students concerning college attendance? Understanding what ultimately draws and/ or dissuades nontraditional students from attending college is important to institutional outreach efforts. Insight into the phenomena can help institutions of higher education increase enrollment. Without research into this area, students may miss the first step in obtaining a post-secondary education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods multi-case study is to determine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. The intent of the study is to allow nontraditional students, through in-depth interviews and surveys, to describe their overall reasons for applying to college later in life. This process will yield relevant data for institutions of higher learning in determining what factors are at play when nontraditional students are making the decision to apply for college. Results of this study will help institutions of higher learning expand upon what they are already doing well and improve in those areas that nontraditional students find problematic. The study itself is descriptive in nature. The study variables are those factors that will be uncovered as a result of survey data in concert with interview processes.

Conceptual Framework

To determine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives, the study will utilize adult learning theory to frame the problem. It is posited that adult learning theory will address how this age group, older learners, utilizes a unique set of learning considerations that often differ sharply from those of their younger classmates (Irby, Brown, Lara-Allecio, & Jackson, 2013). Moreover, as nontraditional students often bring with

them trappings of practical experience often gleaned from work-related activities, one must understand and recognize the uniqueness of their thinking (Knowles, 1986). As a result, adult learning theory will help frame this examination of what ultimately draws and/or dissuades nontraditional students from attending college.

Any brief overview of adult learning theory would be remiss if it did not include considerations from Malcolm Knowles. Knowles, a Harvard and University of Chicago graduate and professor, believed that adults do indeed learn differently than those who are still in their teens or early adult years (Irby et al., 2013). His theories began with a careful review of those first summoned forth by educational scholar John Dewey. Dewey's scholarship helped reveal new considerations for Knowles. In fact, it was this scholarship that acted as a springboard for Knowles (Knowles, 1989). Additionally, Malcolm Knowles's research into andragogy, or the methods and practices of teaching adult learners, has been used as a critical pillar to support many tenets of adult learning theory (Irby et al., 2013).

Although Knowles is of primary interest with regard to this research, other theorists have made substantial contributions to adult learning theory and should also be specifically included: Levin (2007) and Mezirow (1990). By reviewing multiple theorists, one is able to make comparisons and contrasts between and among the existing theories and be better prepared to make calculated assumptions based on preexisting ideas and considerations (Irby et al., 2013). This is important because it can help to expose gaps in the literature.

Adult learning theory relates to this investigation because nontraditional learners are often categorized as being above the age of 21 and, therefore, considered adults (Kemple, 2000; Kudak, 2016; Laher, 2007). Thus, the use of adult learning theory is an appropriate method with which to gain a stronger understanding as to why nontraditional students have chosen to attend

college at a later point in their lives. Two of the most imperative tenets concerning adult learners are self-direction and a heightened degree of independence and motivation (Knowles, 1986). This is important because a proposed method of instrumentation for this study is interviewing. This has been evidenced through research which suggests that adult learners prefer to give open-ended responses to answers and are often motivated by linking their past skills and accomplishments to tasks (Bevan, 2014). Through interviews, one can get a much clearer picture of the reasons behind specific actions of nontraditional students (Munro, 2011).

Adult learning theory helps to address the considerations associated with this research because of its roots in constructivism. This means that learning can be derived in many ways (Irby et al., 2013). Exploring a central idea and coming away with valuable points of meaning is certainly something contained in this particular worldview. Moreover, being able to look at how this issue is related to historical and social constructs helps one make further assumptions in order to generate ideas (Mertens, 2010). Constructivism is often evident in the adult learner. Nontraditional learners hold cognitive experiences gleaned through their work and home applications (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). Indeed, as previously mentioned, being able to be self-directed and motivated, two significant qualities related to most any job, are often possessed by the adult learner (Kudak, 2016). This consideration, attached to theory, might help one realize why a student revisits the idea of attending college after initially deciding against attending. To be sure, this is helpful to colleges and universities so that they may reach out to members of their various geographic communities and help them make an informed choice about their futures.

Overview of Review of Literature

Guiding this study, various examples of literature were explored. Peer-reviewed journal articles on the topic of nontraditional learners were explored in detail (Baptista, 2011; Barr, 2016; Kim & Baker, 2015). Various dissertations and studies have been carefully examined in order to discern potential outcomes and to enhance overall understanding (Dixon-Williams, 2010; Kudak, 2016). Finally, governmental publications have been included in order to incorporate valuable statistical data (Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Department of Education). All of these types of literature serve to guide the researcher in helping provide a foundation of understanding into the nontraditional student and the push and pull factors associated with college attendance.

The major themes of the literature review are categorized by the two previously mentioned factors. The themes associated with pull factors, or those factors that draw a nontraditional student to attend college, are represented through the following: love of learning, familial considerations, and financial affordability (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). The themes associated with push factors, or those factors that have discouraged nontraditional students from attending college, are the following: financial constraints, self-confidence, and technological unfamiliarity (Kimmel et al., 2012). All of these themes have been explored in various ways through the literature.

Although the literature has select considerations and ideas that assist in the examination of the push and pull factors associated with nontraditional students and institutions of higher learning, the factors were never the centerpiece of the research (Barr, 2016; Kudak, 2016; Ruff, 2011); moreover, no current research has yet been found that addresses both of these concerns in an independent way. Consequently, a gap exists in the literature with regard to understanding

what ultimately draws and/or dissuades nontraditional students from attending college.

Therefore, this study is needed to help inform enrollment outreach efforts at the higher education level. For example, an academic institution, upon reviewing the factors that have drawn students to apply, would be able to adjust current practice to bolster the pull factors to encourage more nontraditional students to apply. In the same way, an adjustment could be made to address the deficiencies outlined in the push factors. Clearly, without this study, these considerations may never be realized and academic institutions would only be left with speculative theories about these factors.

Definitions

Andragogy – The methods and practice of teaching adult learners (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015).

Nontraditional Student - An individual who is at least twenty-four years old and currently taking undergraduate courses. However, some studies have used a different age benchmark to determine nontraditional student status. For the purpose of this study, a nontraditional learner will be defined as one who is at least twenty-four years of age (Kudak, 2016).

Pull Factor - A reason why a nontraditional student is drawn towards applying to college after having initially been drawn away from applying.

Push Factor - A reason why a nontraditional student is drawn away from initially applying to college upon the completion of a high school diploma or G.E.D.

Research Questions

The researcher developed two questions that helped him gain a better understanding of the overall essence of the research. The subsequent questions allow for exploration and insight into the reasons why nontraditional learners attend college at a later point in their lives.

Research Question 1- What factors draw nontraditional students towards applying to college?

Research Question 2- What factors draw nontraditional students away from applying to college?

The rationale for these questions rests in understanding the overarching reasons why adult learners have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives.

Methodology

The research design plan was a multi-case study analysis through the use of a survey and interviews which is described more deeply in chapter three of this study. The rationale behind this selection was associated with the consideration that an abundance of relevant information can come from surveys and in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, case study interviews have been used successfully by past researchers (Barr, 2016; Dixon-Williams, 2010). This is important because, through interviewing, relevant pieces of emerging information might help to explain which push and pull factors impact decisions with regard to college enrollment. The interview method has been used with great success when one identifies underlying problems associated with issues that often can be used in concert with survey data (Bevan, 2014). Moreover, the casestudy method is appropriate here in that it links directly with making meaning from conversations and associates itself with the underlying constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2013).

No more than 10 nontraditional students were purposefully selected. Current or former nontraditional students consisted of personal acquaintances, former students, and professional contacts. An email was sent out to the aforementioned individuals asking them to participate in the research study. Those wishing to participate were given the opportunity to learn about the process and potentially be invited to interview. Although this number was relatively small, the reasoning behind it deals with depth. Conceivably, a great deal can come from quality surveys and interviews even if there are only a relatively small number of individuals involved (Bevan, 2014). Fairly recent studies have illustrated that in-depth interviews with a smaller number of participants offers substantial pieces of information from which important data will be gleaned (Kudak, 2016; Laher, 2007). This would be in contrast to more interviews of a shorter nature, which might not yield results of significant depth. The selected participants, a fair mix of genders, were interviewed at a mutually convenient time. The interviews and surveys took place at local libraries. This was important in order to ensure that each individual felt minimal stress and maximum comfort during this important process (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, all relevant aspects of CITI training were incorporated into the interviews in order to demonstrate human protection. By having participants candidly tell their stories, one can come away with valuable pieces of information that lend insight into why adult learners have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives (Creswell, 2013). The human experience is both vast and complex. By allowing for interviews, one is essentially enabling others to share their experiences and unlock understanding (Bevan, 2014). This is important since research shows the responses that the interviewees give will be separate and distinct (Creswell, 2013). Evidently, this is because each interviewee has had different life experiences and varying degrees of influence with regard to college. The process, although time consuming, would allow for the collection of relevant data.

The themes were brought forth through analysis of the transcripts of the participants' individual experiences. By unlocking the who, what, where, when, why, and how aspects of a situation, a researcher is able to uncover important pieces of information which might help him or her answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Significance of the Study

Research into why adult learners have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives serves to benefit stakeholders at the high school level by helping to reveal what deficiencies nontraditional learners face. If those deficiencies can be ameliorated by the time students' graduate, they might be more willing to attend college directly after high school and begin their academic pursuits. Concerning post-secondary learning, colleges and universities can benefit from this research by uncovering what the overall needs are for nontraditional students. Here, again, by recognizing the overall needs that were revealed through the results of the research, colleges and universities can assist nontraditional students take their first step in obtaining a post-secondary education. Therefore, this study will make a contribution to both K-12 and post-secondary institutions of learning.

Although research exists with regard to nontraditional students (Chen, 2013; Chen & Hosler, 2013; Munro, 2011; Laher, 2007), a paucity of studies, especially those linked to multi-case analyses, exists concerning both the push and pull factors that are associated with this type of learner. As a result, a gap is bridged within the literature through this research. By examining the first-hand accounts of nontraditional student experiences, one can glean a sharper understanding of the underlying reasons associated with what ultimately draws and /or dissuades nontraditional students from attending college. Moreover, this research is significant in that it can

be readily replicated in other demographic areas in order to determine if the results are significant and confirmatory (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

This multi-case study builds on research in order to determine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives (Chen, 2013; Chen & Hosler, 2013; Chung, Turnbull, & Hansen, 2017; Kim & Baker, 2015; Kudak, 2016; Munro, 2011; Ritt, 2009; Ruff, 2011). Moreover, the study builds on the tenets of adult learning theory supported by Malcolm Knowles (1986) in examining the aforementioned factors.

Research has illustrated that the population of nontraditional learners had tripled over the past four decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As a result, this study will reveal possible reasons for this increase and uncover factors that both draw and dissuade students from attending institutions of higher learning.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is a thoughtful review of the literature regarding the pull factors that draw students towards attending college and the push factors that initially deterred them from applying after having attained a high school diploma or G.E.D.

Andragogy in Practice Model

The current research expands upon prior research and investigations by Malcolm Knowles (1989). Knowles is often regarded as a seminal figure in adult learning for his revolutionary ideas concerning andragogy which were first published in 1968 (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001). The framework and model that links Knowles's theories to the aforementioned push and pull factors is illustrated through his Andragogy in Practice Model (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001) The model serves as an "enhanced conceptual framework" to examine myriad ways in which Knowles's findings can be applied to various "domains" of adult learning (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001, p.80). The three dimensions of the model are: 1) goals and purposes for learning, 2) individual and situational differences, and 3) andragogy: core adult learning principles. This model can be used in order to determine how best to serve adult learners by examining many facets of their learning and personal situations (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). The primary responsibility for the "goals and purposes for learning" dimension is to determine overarching learning goals. This is important in that institutions of higher learning need to know how to best serve this population (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). The third part of the model deals with six "Core Adult Learning Principles:" 1) learners need to know, 2) self-concept of the learner, 3) prior experience of the learner, 4) readiness to learn, 5) orientation to learning, and 6) motivation to learn. These principles are often used in planning when it concerns adult learners. The second part of the model is mentioned last because it

represents the area that links most closely with the research being conducted in this study. The “individual and situational differences” dimension of the andragogy-in-practice model deals primarily with variables that play an important role in the overall educational experience of an adult learner. The three sub-fields within the model are: 1) subject-matter differences, 2) situational differences, and 3) individual learner differences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Subject-matter differences are associated with how an instructor will employ strategies to scaffold learning. It also means that certain life experiences have given adult learners more skill and content knowledge into certain areas of academic study. Individual learner differences are often linked to “internal cognition, personality traits, and general mental abilities” Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 84). This field helps researchers to understand adult learners from a psychological approach (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). For this research, while the other sub-categories will be explored, it is the “situational differences” sub-category that will be examined in-depth. “This group of factors connects andragogy with the socio-cultural influences now accepted as a core part of each learning situation” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 84).

The aforementioned situational differences are, to an important degree, the push and pull factors that are being examined through this research. Knowles also notes the fact that since these factors are often changing, current research should be employed in order to examine their impact (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). To that end, Knowles pointed out an essential feature of andragogy: “The andragogical model is a system of elements that can be adopted or adapted in many ways. It is not an ideology that must be applied totally and without modification. In fact, an essential feature of andragogy is flexibility” (Holton et al., 2001, p. 128). Indeed, it is the versatile nature of andragogy that allows it to be applied to modern

situational differences that might not have been as prevalent in the mid-1960s when Knowles was doing the bulk of his research (Holton et al., 2001). As such, this research not only directly links itself to the tenets of adult learning theory, but it also aims to bridge a gap in the literature by examining and expanding upon the situational differences sub-category of Knowles's prior research.

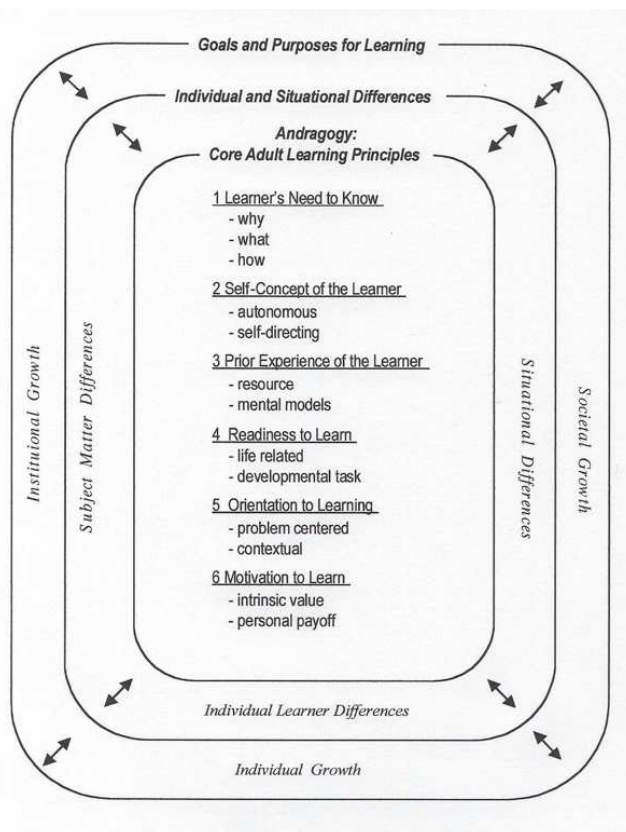


Figure 1. Andragogy in Practice Model chart that describes the adult learning principles and the three sub-fields that link to "domains" of adult learning. Adapted from *The Adult Learner* by Malcolm Knowles, Elwood Holton, and Richard Swanson, 2015, p.80.

The scope of the research examined for this study generally occurred within the last two decades and includes peer-reviewed journal articles, academic essays, dissertations, governmental websites, and scholarly publications. The major research pieces are grouped by corresponding push or pull factor. The themes associated with pull factors, those factors that encourage a nontraditional student to attend college, are represented through the following: love

of learning, familial considerations, financial considerations and the internal provisions of the academic institution. The themes associated with push factors, those factors that have discouraged nontraditional students from attending college, are the following: financial constraints, technological unfamiliarity, self-confidence, and employment (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jinkens, 2009; Kim & Baker, 2015; Kudak, 2016; Laher, 2007; Trowler, 2015).

Nontraditional students make up roughly 40% of the higher education population; moreover, that percentage has increased by over 50% in the past 40 years (Levin, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative that colleges and universities, both two- and four-year academic institutions, have an awareness of the factors that influence this growing population. The overall findings contained in much of the literature illustrate that, while certain studies have been conducted that touch upon factors that have influenced college enrollment decisions (Barr, 2016; Kimmel et al, 2012; Kudak, 2016), much of the research has relied heavily on survey data from other regions of the United States. In fact, a good deal of research comes from international sources (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; ; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Furthermore, academic institutions can benefit from increased enrollment and the ability to remain academically viable if they have a plan in place that looks at both push and pull factors regarding nontraditional students (Barr, 2016; Chen & Hosler, 2016; DiSilvestro, 2013; Jinkens, 2009). This is a unique opportunity for various stakeholders. Students, faculty, administrators, and lawmakers can all benefit from knowing what works best to enrich the academic opportunities for nontraditional students (Levin, 2014; Ritt, 2008). Moreover, research studies and analyses concerning nontraditional students should be conducted on a fairly frequent basis because factors often change over time (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015).

Pull Factors

Love of Learning

One of the most important pull factors that appeals to nontraditional learners, especially those who are of or beyond retirement age, is a love of learning (Baptista, 2011; Barr, 2016; Chen, 2013; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Laher, 2007). In fact, studies have reported that many nontraditional students return to college simply to learn more, (Brodbelt, 1983; DiSilvestro, 2013; Kudak, 2016). Many students, especially those who are retired, only take one or two classes each semester and, more often than not, audit the course instead of taking the course for a grade (Barr, 2016; Kudak, 2016). Moreover, it is evident that the baby boomer learner population is increasing regarding college enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Additionally, the advent of free and reduced costs of college enrollment for those who are over the age of 60 has been a draw for colleges and universities across the United States (Kudak, 2016). With this in mind, colleges need to implement a plan to address the needs of those learners who simply want to attend classes in order to learn new pieces of information and increase certain skill sets (Laher, 2007; Ruff, 2011).

Additionally, medical professionals have seen a direct increase in mental awareness in those individuals who keep their minds active by taking courses and embracing a lifelong love of learning (Brodbelt, 1983; Trowler, 2015). Interestingly, some colleges and universities have even set up programs that would appeal to older adults, and have had strong success with enrollment (Barr, 2016; Ransdell, 2011; Ruff, 2011). Nontraditional students often make up the approximately 30% of students who do not follow a strict academic plan and are, therefore, non-matriculated students. Moreover, these students often take classes at multiple colleges and universities, sometimes during the same semester, depending on the course offerings (National

Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). This is especially true with regard to the aforementioned nontraditional students who are passionate about learning new skill sets in order to advance themselves beyond their current job status (Fragoso, 2011; Kimmel et al, 2012). Colleges and universities would be well-served to recognize how the love of learning impacts the unique needs and attitudes among nontraditional students.

Familial Considerations

Another important pull factor concerns family. Studies have shown that being a role model for one's family is of great importance within our society (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; Fragoso et al., 2013). Although this is not a direct result of the college experience itself, it is an important reason why people return to college (Barr, 2016; Fragoso et al., 2013). Colleges can help nontraditional students gain access to information that will assist their families (DiSilvestro, 2013; Jinkens, 2009). Many colleges and universities have service areas where students can retrieve information and obtain guidance and support from counselors and admissions officers. This idea links back directly with Maslow's theory of self-actualization (Brodbelt, 1983). Nontraditional students return to college to develop a sense of empowerment within their own personal lives; this empowerment can have a direct link on their personal behavior and sense of well-being (Baptista, 2011; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015; Levin, 2014). Moreover, recent research indicates that this sense of well-being has a direct link to perseverance and diligence concerning academic success (Chen, 2013; Ransdell, 2011).

Recent research has been conducted that illustrates the point that being a role model through one's academic pursuits can have a direct impact on other family members (DiSilvestro, 2013; Jinkins, 2009). In other words, nontraditional students have not necessarily had the opportunity to be raised in families where college was a priority (Kimmel et al, 2012); however,

by making the decision to attend college they are modeling behaviors that often have a direct impact on their children or younger loved ones within their families.

The rationale here is that once these individuals have this important mindset, their actions will have an influence on their loved ones. A son or daughter might be more willing to attend college if he or she recognized the benefits obtained by a parent through attending college. (Brodbelt, 1983; Trowler, 2015). Additionally, this sense of empowerment can cause families to grow closer through their academic work and scholastic achievements; this is particularly true when this consideration concerns a first-generation college student (Baptista, 2011; Jinkens 2009). College provides benefits outside the walls of the classroom; familial concerns are an important pull factor for colleges and universities in that they help people realize their goals and, perhaps more importantly, harness the interests of their younger loved ones with regard to potentially attending college. This is a paramount factor that links directly to why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; Fragoso et al., 2013).

Financial Considerations

Financial considerations are clearly a pull factor with regard to nontraditional students (Dixon-Williams, 2010; Fragoso et al., 2013; Kim & Baker, 2015; Kimmel et al, 2012). Interestingly, a recent report found that over 71% of nontraditional students are currently employed (National Center for Educational Statistics). Further, at least 40% of nontraditional students are employed on a full-time basis (Kim & Baker, 2015; Chen & Hosler, 2016). This is an important consideration in that it is often challenging to effectively juggle both work and scholastic concerns at the same time. Many nontraditional students are attending college with the hope that they will receive new skill sets which will enable them to gain promotions at their

current jobs, a salary increase, or an entirely new career (Kim & Baker, 2015; Kimmel et al, 2012; Ritt, 2008). Additionally, recent studies revealed that financial stability is one of the most important factors with regard to nontraditional students (Chung et al., 2017; DiSilvestro, 2013; Kim & Baker, 2015).

The graph below illustrates that the more degrees one possesses, the higher the weekly salary one earns. This connects directly with the consideration that going back to college may have a powerful financial impact. Accordingly, an individual with a high school diploma is making almost half of what an individual would be making with a bachelor's degree (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

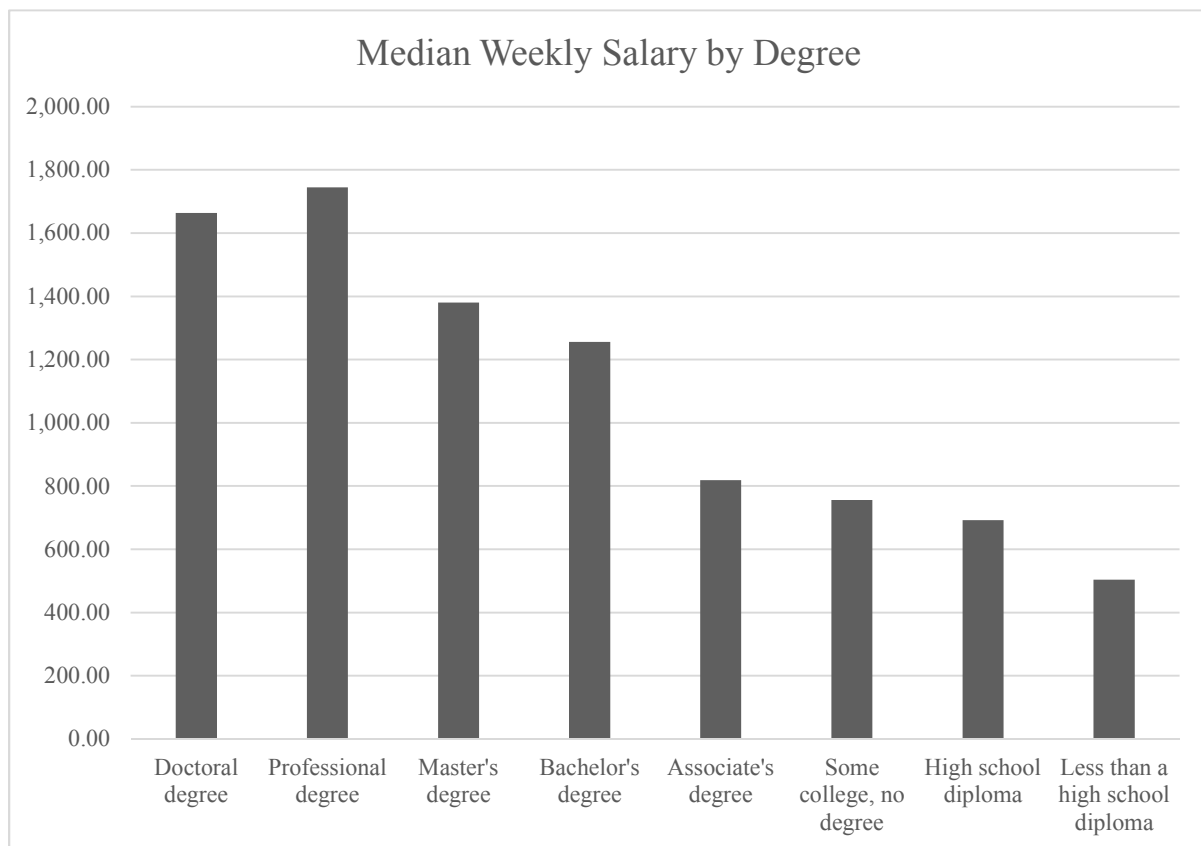


Figure 2. Bar graph depicting the median weekly salary based upon degree attainment. Adapted from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017.

Being able to enroll in programs that will help to increase one's skill set and allow for financial stability is shown to be of great importance among adult learners (Barr, 2016; Dixon-Williams, 2010; Kimmel et al, 2012). As a result, greater focus on opportunities for advancement in areas where nontraditional students currently work would be of benefit (Baptista, 2011; Barr, 2016). Many two-year colleges have implemented programs in manufacturing, and certification programs in the field of human services in order to enrich job prospects and strengthen family income among nontraditional students (Dixon-Williams, 2010; Kim & Baker, 2015; Levin, 2007; Ritt, 2008). As is evidenced through past research and current statistical data, this factor is one that is influential with regard to nontraditional students. Having the opportunity to gain skill sets that can, potentially, set one up for success in life is imperative (Kim & Baker, 2015; Ransdell, 2011).

Internal Provisions

The idea of internal provisions can also be a pull factor for many nontraditional students (DiSilvestro, 2013; Fragoso et al., 2013; Jinkens, 2009). Considerations such as flexible course options, support services, and possible credit for life experience all have been listed as reasons why nontraditional students are drawn to certain colleges and universities (Baptista, 2011; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Ruff, 2011). Flexible course options are particularly interesting. Many colleges are now offering early morning and later evening classes in order to accommodate workers who hold traditional nine to five jobs (Kimmel et al., 2012; Munro, 2011). This gives students the opportunity to attend class before or after work based on their schedule and learning needs. Additionally, online and hybrid classes are becoming more popular for those nontraditional students who work both full and part-time jobs. Hybrid classes are those that meet occasionally on campus but also have an online component, and online classes are those that are

strictly computer-based (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The benefit for many nontraditional students who take online classes is that they can complete their assignments during times that they find personally convenient (Keith, 2007; Kudak, 2016; Ransdell, 2014). Additionally, weekend classes are also popular for those students who work the traditional Monday through Friday schedule (Baptista, 2011; Keith, 2007). A study conducted by Dixon-Williams (2010) found that several colleges that use myriad internal provisions to assist nontraditional students have been successful. For instance, having a college counselor, or other college staff member, act as a liaison for nontraditional students had a positive impact; additionally, having developmental programs that prepare nontraditional students for advanced coursework was also deemed effective (Dixon- Williams, 2010). Having these types of supports to assist nontraditional students on an as-needed basis will assist them throughout their academic journey.

Research also showed career placement services, information about financial aid and scholarship options, and encouragement from staff and faculty were three of the main internal provisions offered to nontraditional students found to be most positive (Landrum, Hood, & McAdams, 2001). Moreover, this evidence reinforces the point that internal provisions associated with financial considerations, and positive reinforcement of overall goals, are often valued by nontraditional students (Baptista, 2011; Fragoso et al., 2013; Kimmel et al, 2012). The opportunity to follow up on these provisions in order to determine if they are continuing to be helpful with regard to the overall needs of nontraditional students is also supported by the literature (Baptista, 2011; Barr, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2012).

Push Factors

Financial Constraints

Previously mentioned as a pull factor were financial considerations. Those are positive reasons why financial concerns play a role in attracting nontraditional students to college. This theme, financial constraints, takes an opposing view. These factors describe the reasons why finances often deter nontraditional students from attending college. On the one hand, college brings with it what can be deemed as an opportunity cost. In short, college is an opportunity for growth; over time, students more than make up for the cost of tuition through higher salaries and wage increases. This is as a result of both the academic content knowledge and the relevant skills that they acquire through their academic training (Posavac, 2011). The problem for nontraditional students is that they feel locked out of these opportunities (Levin, 2007).

There is a direct correlation between earned academic degrees and employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Yet, economic factors have had a direct impact on the decision not to attend college for nontraditional students (Kim & Baker, 2015; Laher, 2007; Levin, 2007). The ambiguous nature of the economy has created a challenging outlook for those without college experience as evidenced through the subsequent statistical findings. Figure 3 illustrates that those with a high school diploma or less account for a 12.6 % unemployment rate. However, those with a bachelor's degree have only a 2.7 percent unemployment rate. As is illustrated, the higher the educational level, the less likely one is to be unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

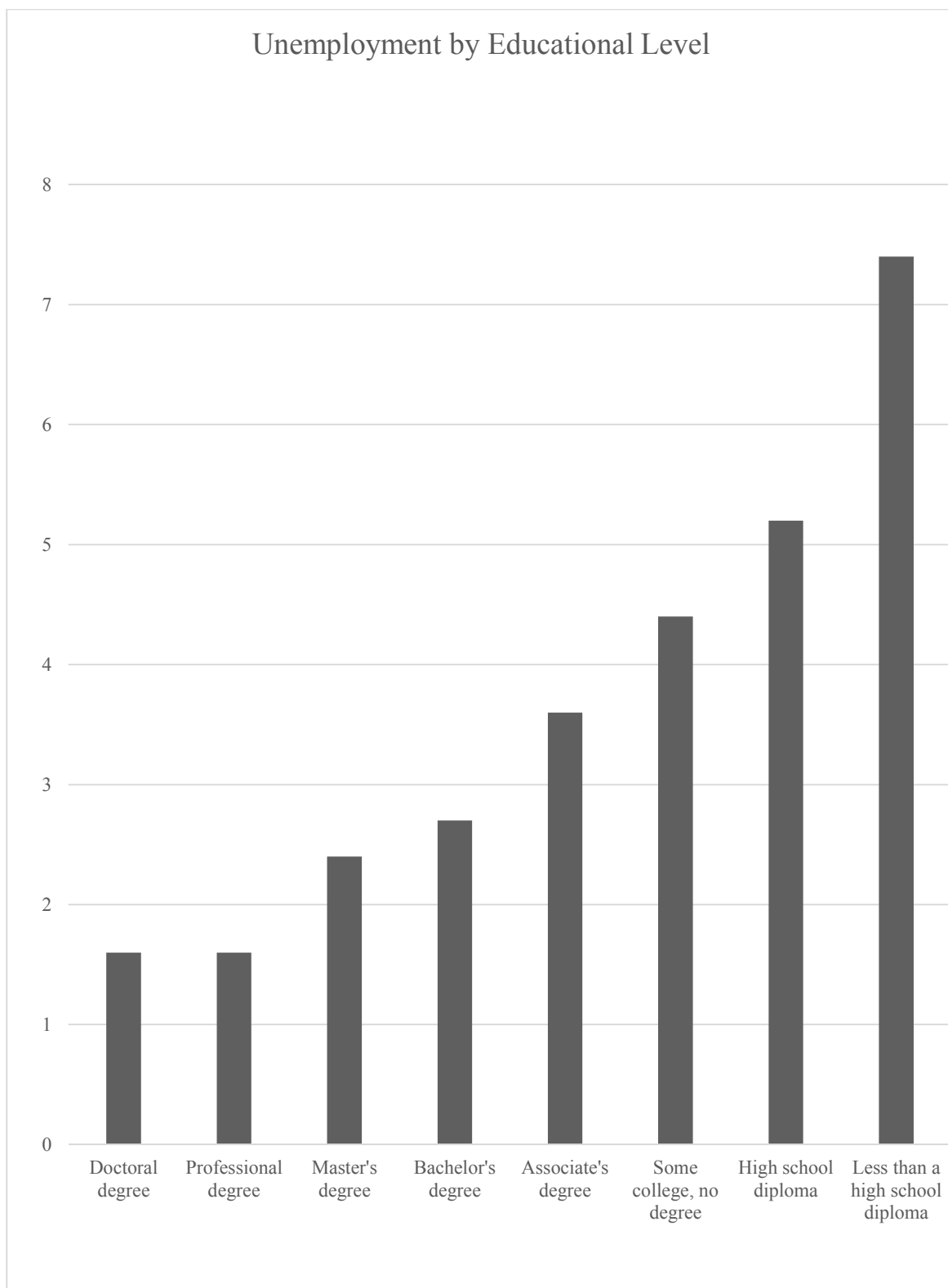


Figure 3. Bar graph describing unemployment levels by education. Adapted from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017.

As is often the case, as one progresses through one's skill set, more opportunities are readily available. However, even with this important statistical data, many students do not subscribe to this point of view; many students feel as though they cannot afford to attend college or, once attending, pay back the student loan cost (Keith, 2007; Kim & Baker, 2015; Rosario et al., 2013). As a result, many nontraditional students will often attend community college for two years then move onto a four-year school to finish their degree (Levin, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics). The reason for doing this rests in the fact that classes at community colleges are less expensive, allowing many students to save thousands of dollars in tuition costs. Nontraditional students do this at a higher rate than traditional students (Chen & Hosler, 2016; Keith, 2007; Kimmel et al., 2012). Moreover, research highlights that financial insecurity is often a reason why nontraditional students consider dropping out of college (Galambos, 2009; Halx, 2010; Rosario et al., 2013). Additionally, with the competitive nature of the job market, many nontraditional students cannot afford to attend college on a full-time basis because they need to continue to work in order to support themselves and, oftentimes, their families (Kim & Baker, 2015; Laher, 2007; Levin, 2007).

As a result of the competitive nature of society, many adults are currently locked out of certain jobs because they do not possess the required academic credentials that would enable them to move up in their companies (Chung et al., 2017; Kimmel, et al, 2012; Ritt, 2008). Not only does this impact their ideas of self-actualization, it can also have a financial impact on raising a family. As was previously mentioned, self-actualization is a theory first brought forth by Abraham Maslow. The theory describes how individuals come to an understanding of the full realization of their own personal potential (Brodbelt, 1983; Trowler, 2015). Now more than ever, single-parent families are becoming ordinary and commonplace in society (US Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 2015). Without having a career that affords students the opportunity to provide for one's family, people are often unable to adequately provide for loved ones (Kimmel et al., 2012). Recent studies revealed that financial stability is one of the most important factors for nontraditional students (Chen & Hosler, 2016; Kim & Baker, 2015). A reexamination into the ways colleges can make learning more affordable for nontraditional students may enhance the overall learning experience and increase student success (Keith, 2007; Ritt, 2008).

Technological Unfamiliarity

One of the major factors that often limits academic success, especially concerning nontraditional workers is technological unfamiliarity (Keith, 2007; Kudak, 2016; Levin, 2007; Rosario et al., 2013; Ruff, 2011). Many nontraditional students, especially those who are over age 50, did not grow up around technology unlike their traditional peers; generally, this group is uncomfortable when presented with the use and application of technology (Kudak, 2016; Rosario et al., 2013). Colleges have now implemented many forms of instruction that move away from the traditional lecture model. For example, online instruction is becoming increasingly popular and research suggests that online learning requires more learner motivation and self-direction than traditional classroom-based instruction (Ransdell, 2014). One innovative way in which colleges are integrating technology with classroom style teaching is through hybrid classes. While these classes have a strong online component, they also meet in the traditional classroom setting (Barr, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2012). The research is unclear if nontraditional students favor this approach as a starting point for those who do not want to dive into complete online classes without a classroom support system. Certainly, technological programs such as software, online, and hybrid forms are on the rise, and it is imperative that all students become familiar with their many functions (Kimmel et al., 2012; Kudak, 2016). Research indicates that if students do not

receive support with technology, colleges and universities run the risk of higher dropout rates among nontraditional students (Kimmel et al., 2012; Levin, 2007).

Lois Ruff (2011) suggested that colleges, universities, or even local municipalities adopt a program where nontraditional students could obtain college-ready skills before actually taking classes. This is helpful in that it would alleviate the stress and pressure that many older adults face before entering college with a skill deficit. Ruff (2011) also noted that students felt more confident with regard to technological applications after having had the opportunity to be exposed to various ways in which to use computers and technology. Jason Barr (2016) noted a similar finding while conducting research in the United Kingdom. Barr examined a program called the "Silver Surfers" that taught "Plus 50" adults new technological skills and applications (p. 53). Groups worked in a cohort, and the learning consisted of self-paced learning modules. Programs such as Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint, and Word were all explored. While this program took place in local libraries and community centers, no indication of similar programs within two- or four-year academic institutions could be found in the literature.

Learning to understand unfamiliar technological applications is vital for nontraditional student success (Fragoso et al, 2013; Jinkens, 2009). Many developmental studies departments at both two- and four-year schools offer classes that help reacquaint individuals with technological skills, time management skills, and planning (Levin, 2007; Ruff, 2016). This is particularly helpful to nontraditional students who may not be familiar with the importance of these skills on the college level (Ransdell, 2014; Ritt, 2008). A firm grounding in technology will help nontraditional students build and utilize the skills that are needed to succeed (Ruff, 2016).

Self-Confidence

A final theme with regard to push factors is that of self-confidence. As is shown through this review, although placed among the factors which can potentially dissuade nontraditional students, some tenets of self-confidence can actually serve to assist nontraditional students. Those areas are included near the end of this section. As many nontraditional students have never taken a college class, and many have been away from academic life for decades, the ability to believe that one is going to achieve success can be difficult (DiSilvestro, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Overall self-confidence issues have been directly linked with academic success (DiSilvestro, 2013; Laher, 2007; Munro, 2011; Spellman, 2007). Oftentimes, nontraditional students withhold a final decision concerning college enrollment because of a lack of self-confidence; this often comes as a result of the nontraditional student's fear of not succeeding academically or not being able to keep up with students who have just graduated high school and who have a working familiarity with current academic skills and training (Brodelt, 1983; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Trowler, 2015). This is particularly true for women, but both genders are impacted by this factor (Munro, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2003). With regard to positive implications associated with self-confidence, the following points are significant. Select studies have shown that colleges and universities can help alleviate this fear by offering special open houses for nontraditional students where they can learn more about programs and ways that they might develop skills prior to taking classes (Barr, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2012; Ruff, 2011). Moreover, by acquiring essential skills, nontraditional learners would be able to extend their academic learning into the workplace. By extending the acquired academic skills, they will be enhancing their self-confidence. For instance, a nontraditional student who takes a computer applications

course prior to enrolling in college might be able to use those same computer skills at work in order to potentially advance his or her goals (Kudak, 2016).

Risk Factors

Of particular interest with regard to this research, specifically into the factor of self-confidence, are the findings of John Levin (2007). Levin created categories (Levin's typology) that helped to identify the particular risk that a nontraditional learner was taking when he or she embarked on learning at the higher-educational level. Levin identified select risk factors such as minority status, financial aid, and full-time employment as examples of characteristics that nontraditional students face when attending college. The increase with regard to these characteristics is then linked directly to the overall risk: "minimal, moderate, high, and ultra-high" (Levin, 2007, p. 9). By being aware of the potential "risks" that are involved, nontraditional students might be able to make adjustments in order to prioritize their overall goals. A direct connection to Levin's considerations of risk regarding nontraditional students is illustrated in the research conducted by Lyle Munro in 2011. The study summons forth several thoughtful ideas that connect directly to the challenges faced by adult learners in the classroom. The study examined how employment issues impact students. According to Munro (2011), the problem rests in the fact that "for the past two decades or more, lecturing staff have witnessed the gradual disappearance of the authentic full-time student on the university campuses" (p. 116). This suggests that nontraditional students, who work at least part-time, are becoming more frequent in the classroom. As a result of this phenomenon, Munro's study aimed to help professors and administrators highlight this concern in order to meet the needs of this population. Using a qualitative case study approach, Munro (2011) conducted "in-depth interviews" with 30 students to better understand how work experiences impact academic experiences. Through the

interviews, the researcher looked at a single research question with several sub-topics : "How do the following experiences impact college success: A. personal and family background, B. high school and extracurricular experiences, C. university sponsored work placements-,D. university life in general , E. future career aspirations and expectations" (Munro, 2011, p. 116). The author's results illustrate that unless nontraditional students are assisted in identifying potential risks and barriers to their education, their overall college experience will be quite challenging (Munro, 2011). Further, he asserts an important point mentioned throughout his research findings: "...unless greater support is provided to these students, it might be more appropriate to replace the seductive slogans (slogans that entice students to attend college) with the more appropriate road sign warning: Wrong way, go back" (Munro, 2011, p. 129). Without financial support and, to a lesser extent, developmental measures, students will not be able to achieve their hopes and goals with regard to college.

This study is important because it connects with the research of John Levin in that both examine the potential risks that nontraditional students take by structuring their academic work around full-time employment, familial responsibilities, and limited financial stability (Levin, 2007; Munro, 2011).

Key Representative Studies

Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, and Hayes (2012) employed the use of thematic considerations in order to highlight motivating factors among older college students. In other words, why do older individuals go back to college after being out of school for many years? Although a good deal of information was presented through the subsequent research, this study was quantitative in nature. Had the researchers used a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, they might have uncovered more detailed pieces of information that would have helped to expand upon the ideas

encapsulated within their study. The research team identified “older students” as those who are 25 or older (Kimmel et al., 2012). The purpose behind this study is revealed through the understanding that by using the information garnered through this analysis, they might be able to make the transition into college more accessible and exit outcomes more fruitful for students. The research team created a series of survey questions that helped to explore the main research question: #1 What is the most important motivating factor that led you to return to college? The quantitative research methods included careful examination of the both online and paper surveys (Kimmel et al., 2014). An analysis of the study sample revealed 48% of the respondents were African American, 46% of the respondents were white, and 6% were of other races (Kimmel et al., 2012). This is important in that it gives balance to the diversity of this particular academic institution. The results were also quite significant. The most significant motivating factor for women was their positive impact upon their children. Women felt that if they went back to school they could be a role model for their children. Men, on the other hand, were motivated by financial independence (Kimmel et al., 2014). The study recommended that future investigations seek to better understand socioeconomic factors to facilitate comparisons between students. For further study, the researchers suggested an examination into the current offerings concerning career assistance. In addition, the researchers suggest an examination into other demographic areas in order to potentially make a confirmative test (Kimmel et al., 2012).

Steltenphol and Shipton (1986) utilized factors when they examined ways in which older students access the skills they need before taking college courses. The study shed light on what works best for older transitioning students entering the classroom after being out of school for many years. The researchers developed a course that students could take to hone in on required skills that would better prepare them once they started taking college-level classes (Steltenphol

& Shipton, 1986). This research is geared for professors and teachers, especially those in developmental studies. They can better understand what works for students who have been away from the classroom for a period of time. This was a qualitative study where researchers interviewed students at various points during their time in this course. The researchers used Kolb's Learning Style Inventory as a way to determine how best these students learned the material with which they were working. The research question was somewhat overarching: #1 What skills are most needed for this group? (Steltenphol & Shipton, 1986). The results found that both math and academic reading skills were needed for this group of students. The results were used to help create developmental courses at various academic institutions. Many of those same courses are used today in order to help students brush up on basic academic skills before they enter into credit-bearing classes. This study could be replicated in other classes with professors giving out surveys periodically with regard to what might be effective and helpful concerning the course and its outcomes. This is essential in that several studies have suggested that academic deficits are one of the major reasons why nontraditional students do not apply to college (DiSilvestro, 2013; Jinkens, 2009; Laher, 2007; Levin, 2007). Through the use of the previously mentioned surveys, the researchers were seeking to remedy this deficit. In addition, this study highlights a qualitative interview approach to the research. Moreover, it also examines factors, in this case academic, that would be important for stakeholders to consider in order to best serve the needs of nontraditional learners. The aforementioned approaches are similar in nature to many other studies that were uncovered through the research. The study was more recently used when examining nontraditional students and their overall approaches to academics (Halx, 2010).

Conclusion

The literature highlights the need for further research into the factors that draw nontraditional learners towards attending college and the factors that initially deterred them from applying after having attained a high school diploma or G.E.D. As is evidenced, although research studies have been conducted concerning nontraditional students, a considerable portion of those studies concern universities that are outside the United States (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; Fragoso et al., 2013; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Additionally, only a few of these research studies have honed in on the factors that lead to the overall decision whether or not to attend an academic institution of higher learning (Barr, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2014; Kudak, 2016; & Steltenphol & Shipton, 1986). Finally, much of the research deals with quantitative considerations as opposed to a qualitative exploration or mixed methods. (Kudak, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2012). With only a small amount of research into why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives, a gap exists within the literature that needs to be explored. Examination of factors that draw students towards attending college and the factors that initially deterred them from applying after having attained a high school diploma or G.E.D. link directly with the situational differences mentioned in Knowles's andragogy and practice model. Specifically, each factor represents important influences and experiences that can have a major impact for nontraditional students (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Review of the current literature reinforces the need for a mixed-methods multi-case study to determine why adult learners have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives.

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter was to describe in detail how this mixed-methods multi-case study examined why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives was carried out. The theory that reinforced this research was adult learning theory. Adult learning theory helps to address these considerations in that it is rooted in constructivism. Interestingly, the philosophical worldview connected to this research is constructivism. Carefully examining a central idea and coming away with valuable points of meaning is certainly something contained in this particular worldview.

As the study's overall design was a multi-case study approach, the association with constructivism fits well. This is because constructivists allow for meaning to be made through various experiences. That meaning often links to a particular phenomenon and allows for one to make careful distinctions within the current research (Creswell, 2013). By examining a current problem, one is able to make the aforementioned meaning through the firsthand accounts of those who have had these experiences. By being able to interview several individuals, one is able to clearly work with more robust data and subsequently bridge gaps in the literature (Stake, 1978). This would stand in sharp contrast to a single –person study that might not yield more copious information and points of data. Specifically, this chapter will address the study design, a description of research sites, participants, type of instrumentation, forms of data collection and analysis, the protection of human subjects, and potential study limitations.

Over the past few decades, the rate of nontraditional students attending college has increased almost thirty percent (Kasworm, 2005). This revelation exposes the fact that colleges and universities need to be prepared for the unique challenges and needs that this population requires. The uniqueness does not stem merely from age alone; the familial responsibilities,

work-related concerns, and underlying technological unfamiliarity are often factors that play a major role in the decision to attend, or not to attend, post-secondary education (Kimmel et al., 2012). While some research has been done with regard to nontraditional learners, little is written on the major factors that draw nontraditional learners to apply to college or those which held nontraditional learners back earlier on in their lives (Barr, 2016; Kudak, 2016; Ruff, 2011).

When one considers nontraditional students, adult learning theory presents a foundational underpinning from which much research can be gleaned (Holton et al., 2001). Factors such as financial concerns, increased employment opportunities, and love of learning are some of the many reasons why this group is enrolling in college at a higher rate than ever before (Baptista, 2011; Chung et al., 2017; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jinkens, 2009; Kim & Baker, 2014; Kudak, 2016; Laher, 2007; Trowler, 2015).

Specifically, Knowles thoughtfully constructed several tenets, used mostly by academics and researchers, which are often used by today's standards as the pillars of adult learning theory.

- Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it
- Their self-concept is that they are responsible for their decisions, and their lives
- Adults have both a greater role of experience and different qualities...The richest source for learning reside in the adult learners themselves
- Always meet learners where they are starting from in terms of interests, problems, and concerns
- Engage the learners in a process of active inquiry
- Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered
- Adults have a deep need to be self-directed (Holton et al., 2001; Irby et al., 2013).

Through careful examination of these tenets, one can discern that adult learners have unique learning characteristics that are often geared towards independence and a reliance on self (Baptista, 2011; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011). It can be argued that this is a result of life skills that have been developed over the years; these skills, by and large, have not necessarily been developed by traditional college students because they are not yet at that point in their personal maturation (Knowles, 1989). Indeed, the increased sense of responsibility, too, makes this population unique. Oftentimes, the sense of being responsible for one's goals and desires in life takes many years to develop; adult learners often come readily equipped with this sense and are thereby set apart from their younger counterparts (Irby et al., 2013). To be sure, this is a progressive theory that is often changing and being amended through various analyses and considerations (Holton et al., 2001). As a result, a set of enduring understandings, created in large part by Knowles, endures. It is these aforementioned understandings that served as the theoretical lynchpin to the research.

This investigation into understanding the overarching reasons adult learners have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives focused on answering two key questions: a) What factors draw nontraditional students towards applying to college? b) What factors draw nontraditional students away from applying to college? The unique combination of factors allowed for this research to take a new angle with regard to this study.

Design

The method used was a mixed-methods multi-case study through both surveys and interviews. By using this method, important pieces of information and more in-depth answers can be gleaned; additionally, survey data is often followed by extensive interviewing in order to more fully explain and emphasize responses (Creswell, 2013). Because constructivism is an

integral part of this research, interviewing was an appropriate way to allow for participants to tell their experiences. Interestingly, this method has been used with success in order to help researchers garner a better understanding for the reasons why individuals' perceptions change (Muth & Kiser, 2008). When considerations need to be explored in a developed way, mixed-methods research, which in this study is largely qualitative, is often the most effective approach (Creswell, 2013). This is because the numeric data that is often relied upon in quantitative research does not paint a true picture of an individual's situation (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). This type of design was most appropriate here in that the intent of the study was to, through in-depth interviews and surveys, allow for nontraditional students to describe their overall reasons for applying to college later in life. Research through interviews helped to illuminate these reasons via the use of salient questions. In addition, one of the primary functions of qualitative research is to explore a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriman, 1998). Evidently, more than one case should be examined; the additional data may often help to confirm results and add validity (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, the triangulation of adult learning theory, surveys, and interviews all help to confirm results and add quantitative significance to the study (Creswell, 2013).

Evidence of the effective nature of the interviewing process and subsequent data analysis regarding the challenges confronting nontraditional students at the university level is found in the literature. Munro (2011) examined how employment issues have impacted students. Specifically, the author used a qualitative case study and in-depth interviews with 30 students in order to understand how work experiences impacted academic outcomes. The author found that the more a student worked, the less successful he or she would be academically. This reinforces the consideration that the number of hours an individual works can have a substantial impact on

overall academic success (Munro, 2011). This example is one that helped guide the research through the aforementioned use of thoughtful interview questions and clear coding.

The literature also references the research of Laher (2007), who studied the needs of approximately 20 nontraditional students using qualitative approaches. The researcher was attempting to examine barriers to their overall education. The research found that personal experiences and economic considerations are often barriers for nontraditional learners in South Africa. While similar in nature, the current study was conducted in Southern New England. Moreover, the consideration that the United States, and, even more specifically, each region of the United States, might have its own push and pull factors adds to the overarching relevance of both research questions.

Research Site and Participants

This study will be conducted in Southern New England. As the participants are former students, personal acquaintances, and professional contacts of the researcher who live in different parts of Southern New England, local libraries were used in order to conduct the surveys and interviews. As such, the environment was one that was both comfortable for the participant but also effective for the interview; an environment with little distractions is best for this type of method (Creswell, 2013).

No more than 10 nontraditional students were purposefully selected from various former students, personal acquaintances, and professional contacts who live in different parts of Southern New England. A purposeful sample was utilized here in that it dealt directly with situational phenomena. The situational considerations presented in the purposeful-sampling method link directly back to the situational differences found in the theoretical underpinnings in Knowles's Andragogy in Practice model (Creswell, 2013; Merriman, 1998). This illustrates that

a direct connection can be made from the theory to the practical application of the research. By understanding the unique situations of the participants, one is gaining insight with which to answer the research questions regarding this study. Although the number of participants was relatively small, the reasoning behind it deals with depth. Conceivably, a great deal can come from quality interviews and surveys even if there are only a relatively small number of individuals involved (Bevan, 2014). Ten participants would give the researcher the opportunity to truly dig deeper into their personal experiences and hopefully garner important data.

Additionally, by knowing the participants, a comfort level is formed that can often lead to more candid and in-depth responses as opposed to guarded responses that might be given to an unknown or outside researcher (Stake, 1978). What is more, this would be in contrast to more interviews of a shorter nature which might not yield results of significant depth. Nontraditional students were selected since this is the focal point of the research. A nontraditional student, for the purposes of this study, is defined as an individual who is at least twenty-four years old and currently taking undergraduate courses. An email was sent out to these individuals who happen to be at least age twenty-four (Appendix A). Age and coursework were verified by identification and registration forms that participants were asked to provide to the researcher. Those wishing to participate were then given the opportunity to learn about the process and potentially be invited to interview. Prior to the interview, all interviewees signed a consent form with regard to the purpose of the interview and overall nature of the research (Appendix F). All of the aforementioned procedures were aligned to the protocols addressed through the IRB guidelines. Additionally, the researcher was prepared to answer any questions or concerns that the participants might have. All names of participants were coded to ensure anonymity.

Instrumentation

With regard to instrumentation, a survey consisting of 40 questions was given. The survey being used was developed by the Institute of Behavioral and Applied Management (2012). This survey was appropriate for this research as it related to the problem under investigation by examining the factors that pull nontraditional students towards applying for college and the factors that push them away from applying. Permission for the unrestricted use of the aforementioned survey was granted by Dr. Sara Kimmell, author of the survey and affiliated with the Institute of Behavioral and Applied Management (Appendix G). Dr. Kimmell's research differs from that in this study in that the interview method was not used, and select factors that are being used in this research are not used in her team's study.

This survey was used to gain a better understanding of the factors that pull nontraditional students towards higher education and those factors that push students away from higher education (Appendix C). The method of administration of the survey was paper and pencil.

This instrument first looked at demographic information. Gender, race/ethnicity, current annual salary, employment status, and current number of people living in the household were the major components of this section. A key component of the survey concerned pull factors (e.g., a desire for a pay increase, promotion at work, encouragement from family and friends, and the idea of being a role model); these are all survey questions that link to the reasons why one returned to college. The third section of the survey dealt with factors that might have initially pushed a nontraditional learner away from applying to college. Considerations of age, lack of technological skills, finances, discouragement from others, and lack of personal time were some of the major components of this section. Finally, the survey allowed for a section where participants could write additional remarks that might be helpful to the overall nature of the

research. The survey answers dealt with a range of agreement or disagreement. For instance, if a participant were to answer “strongly agree” for one of the responses, then that would most likely mean that he or she had a strong amount of agreement with regard to the question. On the other hand, if a participant were only to agree, that would mean that while he or she does agree with the statement, he or she does not feel very strongly about the question.

This Likert-scale method presents a sufficient range of options that gives the participant a degree of latitude in his or her answers. Finally, the additional response section at the end of the survey allowed for the participants to share potential points that might not have been included in the survey questions. This method is very common in both qualitative and quantitative research because it yields copious data points (Creswell, 2013).

All interview questions were developed by the researcher after having explored various types of interview questions that are associated with case-study research and the adult learner (Creswell, 2013). Concerning design, 16 interview questions were used. The language of the questions will be easy to understand by the participant. This is important because a poorly-worded question might confuse the participant and generate a response that might not be helpful for the research (Merriman, 1998). This number of interview questions was effective in that it was not overwhelming; most surveys can often elicit responses that are thoughtful and can be completed usually within an hour (Creswell, 2013). If the researcher were to construct an interview with a considerably large number of questions, he or she might not obtain answers of depth in that participants might become less attentive after being interviewed for a longer period of time (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998).

Each of the interview questions was associated with either a push or pull factor contained in the research themes and directly connected to the research questions. For instance,

question one asked the participant the following: *Thinking back to when you attained your high school diploma, why did you not apply to college at that time?* Although intentionally overarching, the response can be probed for further information. Moreover, the questions addressed the emergent themes that were garnered from the literature. The themes of financial considerations, familial concerns, and overall uncertainty with regard to technology and academic success were explored here (Appendix D). The use of various themes is often an essential element in qualitative research that can help to present important findings (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). In order to ensure validity, the questions were reviewed by scholars in the field; any changes suggested by them were made by this researcher.

Data Collection

Individuals who were known to be at least 24 years old and currently taking college classes were recruited via email concerning participation (Appendix A). The survey and interviews took place in locations selected by the participant. This is important in order to ensure that each individual felt minimal stress and maximum comfort during this process (Creswell, 2013). The surveys and interviews were conducted over a period of one month (Appendices C and D). The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The interviews were about an hour in length. A recorder application was used on the researcher's cell phone. This is important because that application has been used in the past while conducting interviews for research during doctoral coursework. Moreover, the file, once transcribed, was transferred to a Word document so that more than one file was available for back-up purposes. The computer and cell phone were both password-protected. Additionally, along with the recorder application, the researcher took handwritten notes in order to assist in the probing of select questions and further points of discussion (Creswell, 2013).

A chronology of events is as follows: The participant was first greeted and asked to review and sign the necessary human protection and permission forms (Appendices B and F). Any questions that the participant had were answered at that time. The participant was first asked to complete the survey. Once finished, the researcher moved on to the interview question portion of the meeting.

The data collected from the surveys helped to give a foundational understanding of the factors that were being examined in the research questions. The data collected from the interviews helped in determining if any reoccurring factors exist that play a role in this consideration. Quotes were also used to illustrate various perspectives (Mertens, 2010). By having participants candidly tell their stories, a researcher can come away with valuable pieces of information that can assist with research. To be sure, the human experience is both vast and complex. By allowing for interviews, one is essentially enabling others to share their experiences and unlock understanding (Bevan, 2014). This is important in that the responses that the interviewees provided were separate and distinct. It can be inferred that each interviewee has had different life experiences and varying degrees of influence with regard to college. Some interviewees might have thought about going to college in the past while others might not have taken any interest in college at all. For this reason, the interviews were carefully examined and coded. All raw data was kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. All documentation was coded for anonymity.

Reliability

Interviews and surveys have long been used to attain data for myriad research projects (Bevan, 2014; Creswell, 2013). The researcher attempted to remain subjective by crafting open-ended questions that did not attempt to limit the responses of the interviewee. This ties directly to

the consideration of the narrative nature of the study. The following methods were used to ensure validity/reliability:

1. Member Checking: Member checks seek to make certain that the participants responses, in this case both survey and interview responses, are accurate (Creswell, 2013; McMillian & Shumacher, 2010). The researcher will meet with participants once the transcripts had been transcribed in order to have the participants review the transcripts for accuracy. Participants were asked to sign off on the transcription at that time.
2. Peer Debriefing: In peer debriefing, the researcher talks with peers about the coded, and therefore anonymous, data to ensure that proper steps were taken to ensure reliability. The selected peers would be scholars in the field of research and would provide insight into bias and potential considerations with which the researcher should be aware. Peer debriefing, too, has an accepted degree of reliability with regard to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).
3. Triangulation: The use of multiple source methods in order to add validity and verification to their overall findings is known as triangulation (Creswell, 2013). For this research, use of survey data, interview responses, and theoretical applicability all serve to form a triangulation of support for the methods utilized in this research. The researcher cross-checked data from the interviews and surveys in order to make important comparisons with overarching theory and, therefore, utilize triangulation.

The importance of validity is further enhanced by rich and thick descriptions. These descriptions mean that the researcher is providing abundant and thoughtful information that not only adds to the overall meaning of the research but also adds to transferability (Creswell, 2013,

p. 252). Moreover, by allowing for these descriptions, this research could be easily replicated in the future and potentially close gaps in the literature, while simultaneously confirming findings.

Data Analysis

Coding was used in both the surveys and interview questions in order to reveal reoccurring statements that might link back to the research questions. The coding was completed through a researcher-designed Microsoft Excel application. For instance, it might be revealed that, for the interviewees, financial considerations were a prevailing factor. If this should happen, the response was coded under that thematic category. As was previously mentioned, each interview question will link directly to one or both of the research questions. Both research questions have associated themes that have been revealed through the exploration of the literature. Associating coding with thematic categories is an accepted method of organizing data (Creswell, 2013). If there was a reoccurring response, coding will be able to isolate and identify the response and, therefore, use it as a possible data point with regard to the answering of a research question. Additionally, should a new theme emerge through the analysis, it was included in the research. Next, categories were formed. These categories linked directly to the research questions. For instance, according to the literature, financial concerns are most likely a major push factor for nontraditional students. It is speculated that this would probably be a reoccurring problem. All of the relevant participant quotes and phrases were placed into the appropriate category. This process, although time-consuming, allowed this researcher to take hold of relevant data. The methods were mostly brought forth through exploration. By unlocking the who, what, where, when, why, and how aspects of a situation, a researcher is able to uncover important pieces of information which might help him or her answer the research questions (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). Here again, the researcher's constructivist worldview comes into play.

By being able to make important distinctions with regard to the participant responses, one is indeed making meaning and creating a solid basis for one's findings (Merriman, 1998). The evidence links directly to the first-person accounts of the participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

During the initial interview, all safeguards were explained both verbally and in writing (Appendix F). The researcher, to the best of his ability, remained objective at all times. Participants were, in no way, be pressured or forced to discuss any situation that might cause them to be uncomfortable. The researcher conducted a post-interview conversation with each participant in order to determine that he or she had not experienced any type of undue stress as a result of the interview. This is imperative because the researcher was prepared to ask follow-up questions of the participant. If the participant did not feel comfortable during the initial interview, it might be concluded that he or she might be hesitant to give thoughtful follow-up questions (Merriman, 1998). All data was kept in a locked office and on a password-protected computer to which only the researcher has access. Moreover, all materials related to the study will be destroyed. As a result, the use of the aforementioned safeguards such as member checking, peer debriefing, and the handling of sensitive data helped to ensure the overall safety of the data. The way in which a researcher conducts himself during this process is an imperative that speaks to his or her ability to conduct further research in an ethically sound and mindful way (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Finally, the researcher participated in the Human Subjects Research (HSR) course sponsored by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program, Appendix G). This course allowed for important considerations to be understood with regard to the treatment of research and the overall sensitive nature of human subjects. All of

these measures helped to deter any bias and allowed for the research to be conducted in an objective and thoughtful manner.

Limitations

The limitations of the research concern the small demographic area in Southern New England where it was conducted. The research did not extend itself out of these boundaries and potentially examine other sources of population that might have changed the results. A further limitation is the small number of participants. It can be argued that a larger number of participants might be able to yield more robust results and perhaps a heightened understanding of the experience.

Another limitation is the researcher's closeness to the participants. On occasion, findings are compromised through personal biases that a researcher has concerning those with whom he or she is interviewing (Creswell, 2013). Since the participants were purposefully selected from various former students, personal acquaintances, and professional contacts, a degree of bias might be present. This is because the researcher already knew the participants. Though important to consider, this bias was remedied through both member checking and peer debriefing. The researcher ensured that all interview data and survey data were reviewed for potential bias through the aforementioned safeguards of member checking and peer debriefing. Although limitations have been identified, the safeguards and overall benefits appear to help in dealing with any potential concerns that may arise.

In sum, the qualitative nature of the interviews will speak to the researcher's constructivist ideology. By adhering to carefully crafted research questions, interview questions were created that helped to gain insight into both the push and pull factors associated with adult learners and the reasons why they enter into college and might not have done so at a more

traditional time. Moreover, through the creation of a safe and comfortable environment during the interview process, the participants were better able answer questions and be free to summon forth more elaborative responses. The data was be coded in an anonymous way, and all of the previously mentioned safeguards were put into place in order to ensure that proper ethical standards were being met. Finally, the data was carefully analyzed in order to disaggregate themes that will help to explain some of the reasons why this phenomenon is occurring. The subsequent chapters explore the findings of the data, and how this data can help to make an important impact with regard to considerations of college concerning nontraditional students.

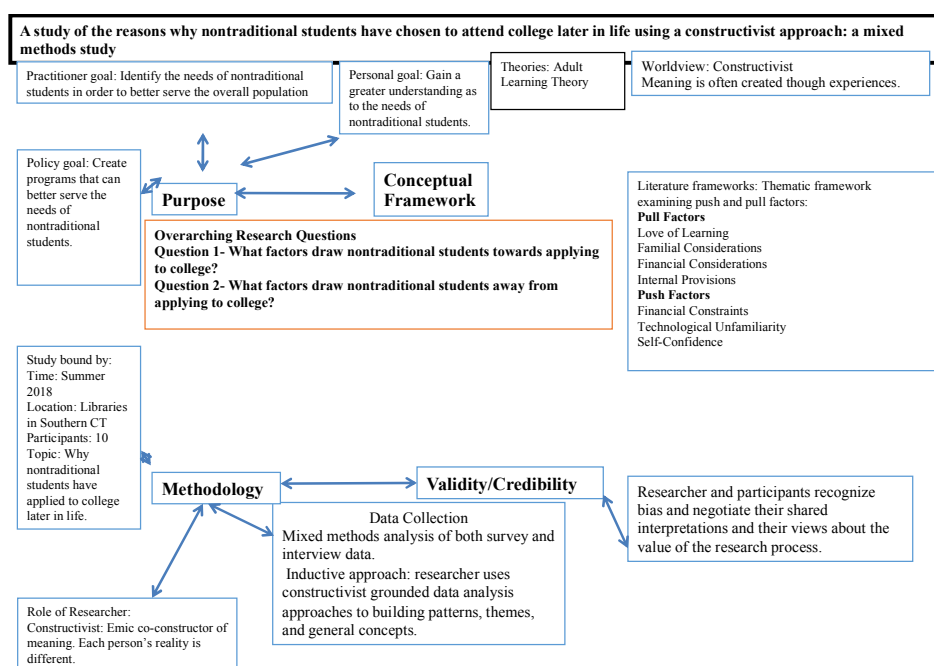


Figure 4. Concept Map. Adapted from "Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach" by J. Maxwell, 2013. P5. Copyright 2013 by Sage.

CHAPTER FOUR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter is a careful review of the data collection and analysis process. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine why nontraditional students chose to attend college at a later point in their lives. The study itself was descriptive in nature. The study variables were those factors that were uncovered as a result of both the survey and interview results. The intention was to allow nontraditional students, through in-depth interviews and surveys, to describe their overall reasons for applying to college later in life. Case studies were conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors draw nontraditional students towards applying to college?
2. What factors draw nontraditional students away from applying to college?

In the following sections, the data collection process is discussed and analyzed. Next, an analysis of the survey data is reviewed. Lastly, emergent themes with regard to both push and pull factors are discussed and analyzed. This analysis will be summoned forth through both direct quotes and participant summaries. Using words and phrases as direct evidence, the analysis will connect each overarching theme with the evidence attained through both the survey and interview data. Moreover, that evidence is synthesized through the responses of other participants in the research study.

The data collection through surveys and interviews took one month. The study used a sample of convenience; therefore, individuals who were known to be at least 24 years old and currently taking college classes were recruited via email. The responses mirrored the considerations set forth in the initial dissertation proposal. Ten participants, all of whom were at least 24 years old and taking college classes, were surveyed and interviewed. All meetings were conducted at regional libraries. The survey portion of the meeting lasted approximately 20

minutes for each participant. This was ample time for each participant to answer each question, and to also provide any further details in regard to the questions posed on the survey form. While there were no direct discrepancies concerning the survey form, some of the applicants responded with a response of “N/A” or “not applicable” to some of the questions. This was clearly stated as an option on the survey form and, as a result, did not step away from the overarching plan described in Chapter 3 of the dissertation. Concerning the interview portion of the meeting, most interviews lasted 45 minutes to one hour. There were no discrepancies in data collection from the plan presented in chapter 3 of this dissertation proposal. As expected, some respondents provided more detail with their answers, as opposed to others who needed further prompting in order to elicit a response that the researcher felt was helpful for the question being posed. Regardless, the vast majority of the interview responses uncovered a great deal of evidence that directly linked to the previously mentioned research questions. The only slight concern presented here was that sometimes interviewees were not able to attend their initial interview session and had to reschedule. When that happened, arrangements were made to reschedule the session to a mutually convenient time. All sessions were conducted without interruption, and the researcher was able to employ member checking in order for each interviewee to determine the accuracy of the transcribed interview. No other changes were made to the transcription. When each session reached its conclusion, each participant was paid \$20.00 for his or her time.

The data was transcribed by the researcher and pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of each participant. Moreover, once the transcription was typed and checked by members, coding was used by the researcher to extract words and phrases that would compare to the overarching themes represented in the study. Moreover, the use of coding allowed common words and phrases to be identified that might play a role in highlighting the overall phenomenon.

This was important because even though each participant's experiences were unique, many of them had similar circumstances that lent to their overall messages presented in the narratives.

Table 1. Select Descriptive and Demographic Characteristics Table

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	RACE	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	EMPLOYMENT
TROY	Male	25-34	Black/ Afr. American	\$50,000-\$74,999	Full-Time
ANTHONY	Male	25-34	Other/ Multiracial	\$0- \$24,999	Part-Time
ROSE	Female	55 or Over	White	\$75,000-\$99,999	Part-Time
CHRISTIAN	Male	25-34	Black/ Afr. American	\$25,000-\$49,999	Full-Time
LORI	Female	35-44	Black/ Afr. American	\$25,000-\$49,999	Full-Time
JUAN	Male	25-34	Latino/ Hispanic	\$0- \$24,999	Part-Time
SHANNON	Female	35-44	Other/ Multiracial	\$50,000-\$74,999	Full-Time
ERIC	Male	25-34	Latino/ Hispanic	\$25,000-\$49,999	Part-Time
LOUISE	Female	55 or Over	White	\$100,000 or more	Part-Time
CODY	Male	45-54	White	\$50,000-\$74,999	Full-Time

The previous table provides the following data with regard to participant demographic data

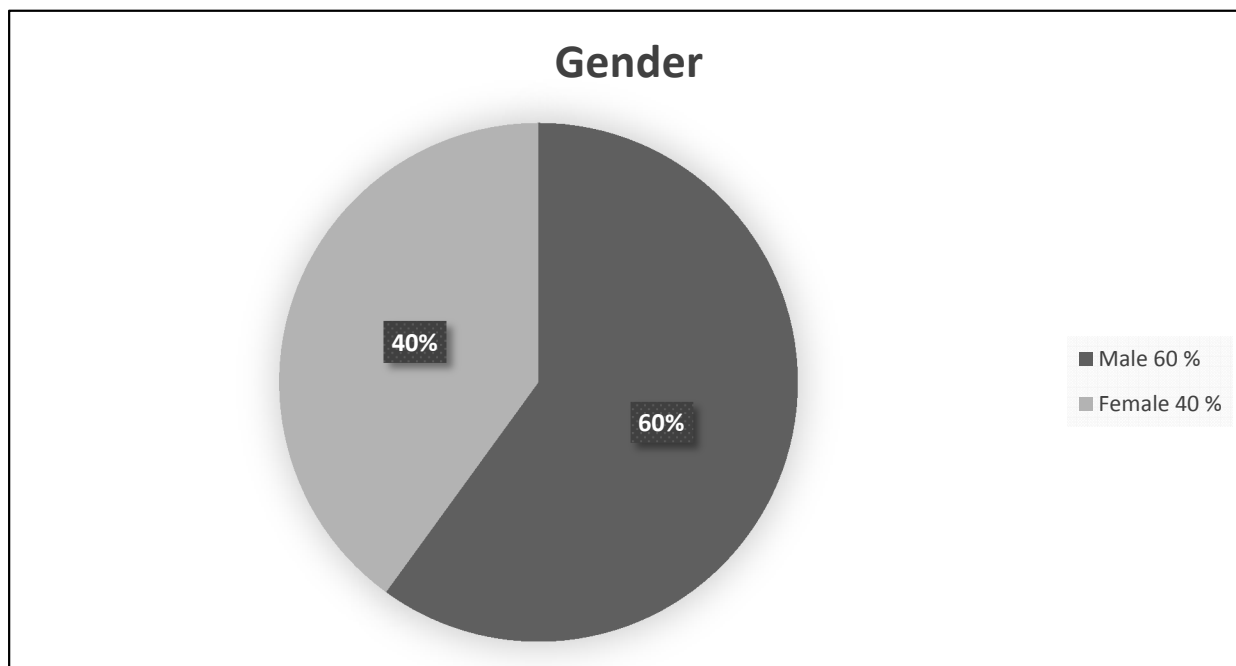


Figure 5. Participant demographics by gender.

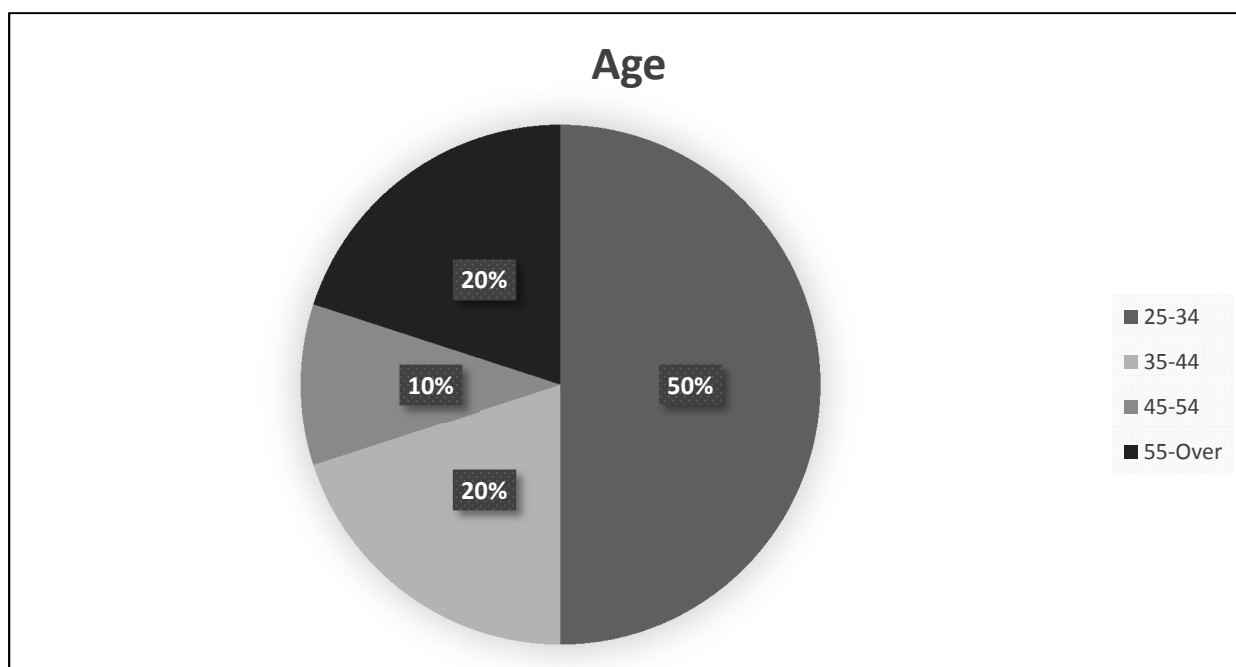


Figure 6. Participant demographics by age.

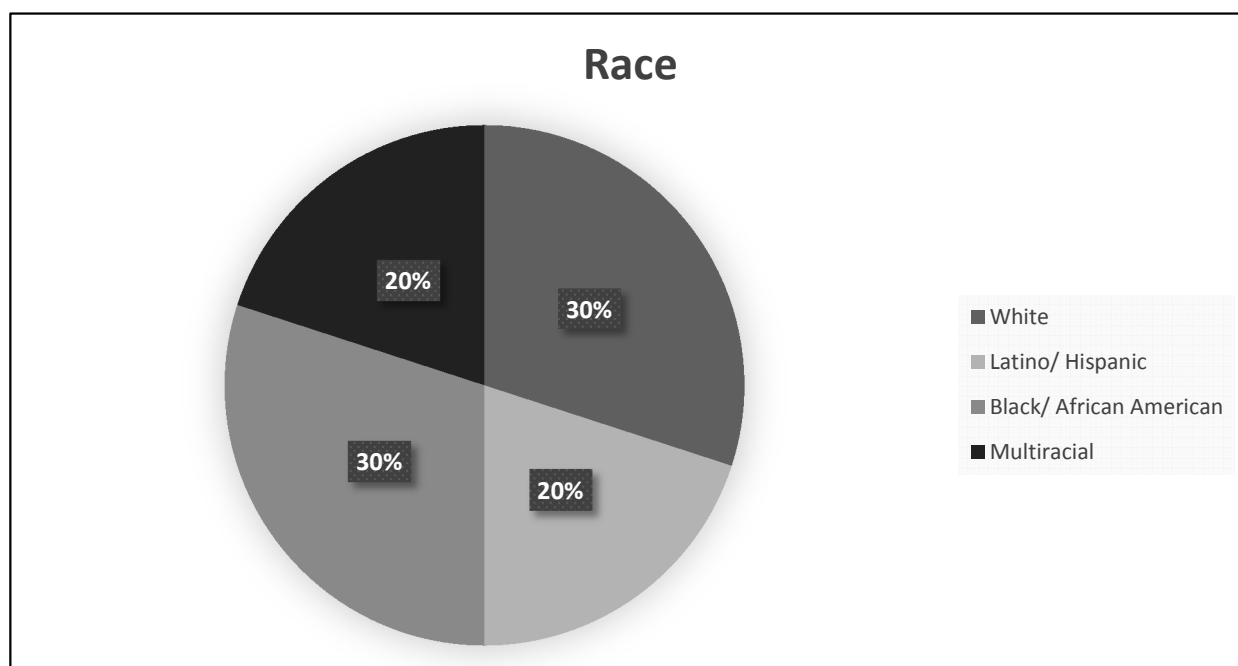


Figure 7. Participant demographics by race.

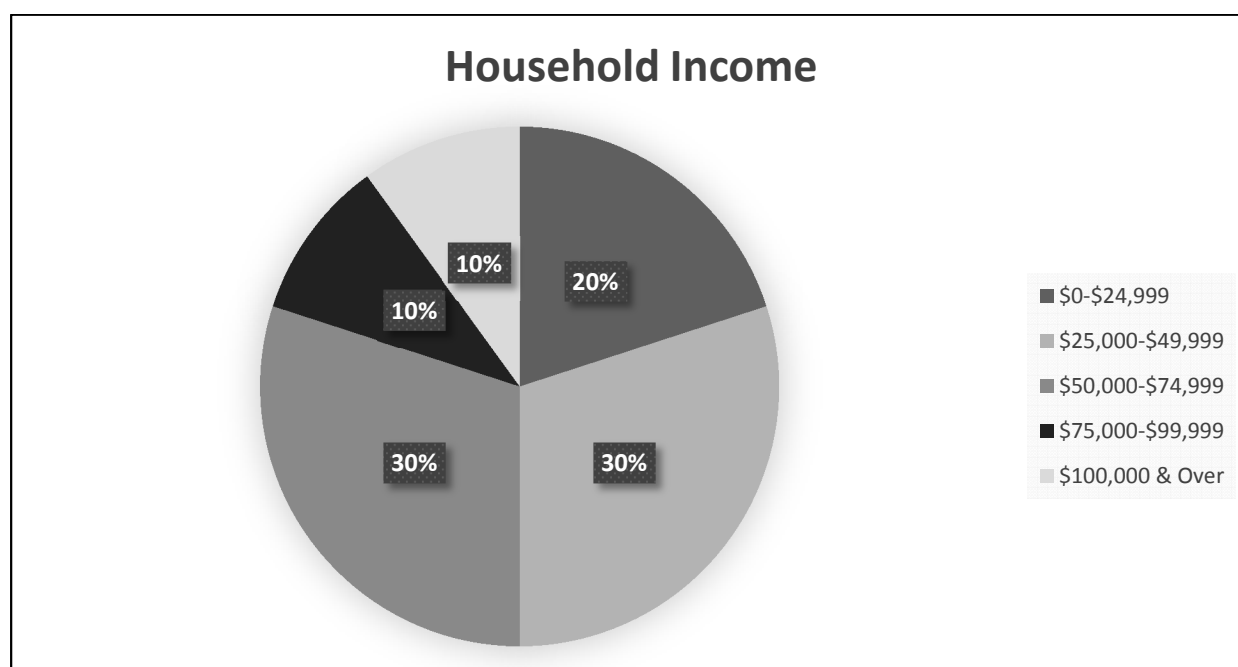


Figure 8. Participant demographics by household income.

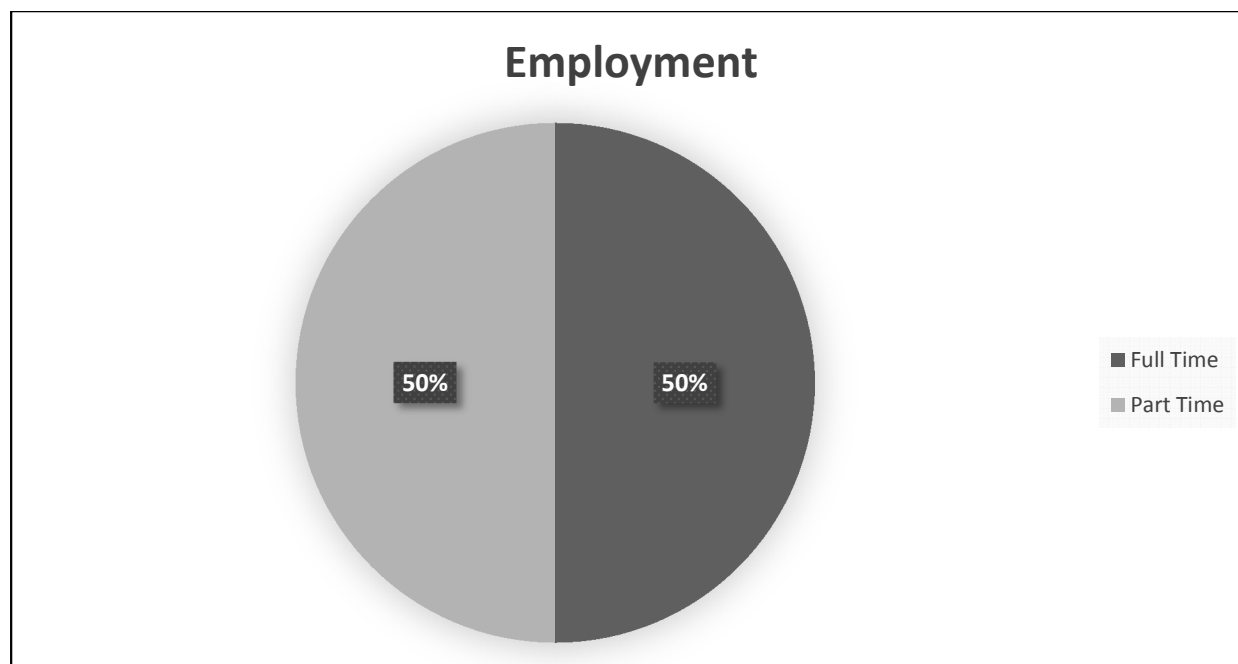


Figure 9. Participant demographics by employment status.

Thematic Analysis

Pull Factors

Love of learning.

The results of the data analysis suggested that love of learning was paramount for at least two of the participants. Both Rose and Louise were female students over the age of 55. While Rose went back to school at a later date in order to fulfill a career associated with Alzheimer's patients, she mentioned more than once in her interview that it was indeed a love of learning that compelled her to return to college:

I wanted to learn more. I took classes in order to attain my degree. But, you know, I still take classes in areas that I would like to learn more about. Last semester I took a class on the history of art. It was something that I knew very little about, but I wanted to learn more. I found the class to be very interesting. Now, when

my husband and I go to some of the local museums, I am able to better understand the paintings and artwork.

Through this, it can be evidenced that even though Rose was initially attending college to work on a degree that was related to the medical field, she later found that opportunities were available to expand her knowledge. This led her to take courses in areas that were not directly associated with her degree, but which offered her the opportunity to expand her knowledge base. Rose explained that increasing her knowledge as something associated with her childhood:

Like I said, I always enjoyed learning new things. My mother would take me to the library when I was a little girl and let me pick out two books to read. We would take the bus each Saturday into town. I think that was when I really started learning new things. I didn't actually think it was just college that could help you learn, but now I know that college has so much to offer. I always to get to class early because I want to be ready for whatever the professor brings up. I like doing that.

Like Rose, Louise is an older, nontraditional student. However, Louise went to college later in life simply for the love of learning:

After being a housewife for so many years, I was sitting at home one day, my kids were all grown with their own families, and I was tired of doing the same things every day. It was either in the newspaper or on TV where I heard about classes for older people. I had been thinking about it for a while but something always came up. Finally, I decided to call and find out more. My first class was French. I had not taken French since I was in high school, and wanted to get back into it. I

always thought that my husband and I could go back to France some day, and I would actually know how to talk to people. I had a good experience. After that, I would take one class at a time. The best part about it is I also got my husband to take a couple of classes with me also.

Louise further reported that she would often take an interest in learning new things at home while she was raising her children. She learned how to cook, embroider, and associate herself with many aspects of home repair.

As is evident, the love of learning has an important part to play in the decision for certain nontraditional students to attend college. The data uncovered that most nontraditional students in this study who expressed love of learning as a main pull factor were often close to retirement age and taking non-credit courses, as was the case for both Rose and Louise. This would align directly with the aforementioned research in chapter 2 of this study.

Familial considerations.

Being a role model for a family member was an important understanding evidenced through this research. Many of the participants described how their lives were challenging and that, without some type of motivation, it often appeared to be impossible to attend college. In addition, many participants did not really know too many people who had attended college, let alone those who attained an associate's degree. However, it was often the case that participants felt compelled to attend college to prove to others, especially family members, that they could take this first important step in their lives. In particular, Troy, Christian, and Lori accentuated

this consideration. Troy's determination was given rise through a devotion to his younger brother:

I wanted to be a role model for my brother. He never asked me to apply to college, but I wanted to apply so that he could see how important it is. He has started to give up on school. I use[d] to help him, but he does not want to put much time into it anymore. It's like some of the kids he hangs around with on the street are not good examples for him. I wanted to show him that there is more out there than just that. My mom also talked with me about it and thought it might be a good idea to apply.

Troy felt as though he did not want his brother to fall into the same problematic situations in his life in which he fell into himself. Troy recounted in his interview that he disassociated himself with academics when he started hanging out with "the wrong people." This led him to almost not finishing high school and stepping away from any potential interest in pursuing higher education. He also felt that since he never had anyone in his life promoting higher education, his going to college would have a positive impact on his brother's life.

Christian's motivation was his young son. Christian is a single father who cares deeply about the welfare of his son. His comments reflected on how his upbringing will prove to be an example for his own son in that he wants his son to have a more advantaged life than himself:

My son is my motivation. I am a single dad and my son is in the second grade. He is learning something new all day, every day. He is my motivation because I want him to have the best in life. He needs to see me doing the best I can for the both of us, you know? I did not have all that growing up. I kinda think that kids need that

example. It's like, I want to be able to provide for him in the best way that I know how. I'm for real when I say that the degree will help the both of us.

Christian mentioned that he has had many challenges being a single father. He was not exactly sure if he wanted to go to college because he was worried that this would be more time away from his son. However, after talking with his coworkers and other individuals in his life, he arrived at the conclusion that he had a "responsibility" that went beyond merely raising his son. He wanted to have a greater impact. As a result, even though Christian's son is not of an age where college is an imminent consideration, Christian feels that his decision to attend college will help both him and his son in the future. "Sometimes I will do my homework alongside my son. I want him to see that I'm learning new things, too." Christian's decision directly connects to the evidence contained in the literature review that a seminal factor with regard to attending college is the recognition a parent receives from a child. In other words, a child is often more willing to attend college when he or she comes from a home where others have attained a college degree or certificate.

For Lori, her daughter was clearly a reason why she went back to college at a later point in her life:

Seeing my daughter grow up is definitely motivating. She is an inspiration. I don't know that I've always been the best mother in the world. It's like, I think I'm on the right track right now because I'm working full-time and going to school at the same time. Sometimes I forget that what I need to do is set her up for hers. When I see my daughter learn something new, I think of myself learning something new in college. I think we motivate each other.

Lori revealed early in the interview that one of the main reasons why she initially did not apply to college directly out of high school was that she became pregnant. She did not regard the pregnancy in any negative light; however, she made it a point to emphasize that her daughter had a very powerful impact on the woman Lori is today. Lori mentioned that by having her daughter, she realized that she truly enjoys working with children. To that end, she currently works in a preschool facility and looks forward to attaining her degree in early childhood education. She equated much of this to the impact that her daughter has had on her life. She wanted to ensure that her daughter attains a college degree in order to attain success in life.

To be sure, familial considerations had an important impact on many participants in the study. The opportunity to influence either a son, daughter, or other family member appeared to be a factor in their decision to attend college at a later point in their lives. The evidence exemplifies that going back to college has had a profound positive influence on the lives of children and other younger family members with whom nontraditional students' impact.

Financial considerations.

Finding a job where one is paid well is a priority for most individuals in our society. As was previously mentioned, 71% of nontraditional students are currently employed (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Many traditional college students often work part-time or have a work-study job where they assist in various offices or departments on their college campus, also in a part-time fashion. However, nontraditional students oftentimes look at this consideration through a different lens. More often than not, nontraditional students have had work experience before they ever step foot on a college campus. This study, as evidenced through the statistical findings, revealed that 50% of the participants were working full-time, and

50% of the participants were working part time. The part-time data might be ambiguous in that some of the respondents revealed through their interviews that they had two part-time jobs, which would equate to full-time employment. However, some of the participants were working on an as-needed basis and did not always have the same number of hours each week. This is to say that some weeks they would be working what would be considered full-time hours, and other weeks they would be working less than full-time hours. In any case, financial stability was of paramount importance to most of the participants as revealed through a careful analysis of the data. Three participants-Juan, Shannon, and Eric-illustrate the importance of being financially stable as it relates to a nontraditional college student.

Juan was motivated to become financially stable based upon his current work experiences:

I hope to find a really good job because I will have a degree and the skills that I've learned. With some jobs I know that you can't get a pay increase unless you have a certain degree. I think that's one of the reasons why going to school is important because it helps you to advance at work.

Juan's comment was indicative of almost all of the participants in this study. Most, through past experiences, have come to the realization that a substantial pay increase may never be realized without a college degree. In Juan's case, he worked multiple part-time jobs where the hours would often fluctuate weekly. He mentioned the following: "I can't ever get out of this cycle unless I have a degree to back me up." Through his interview, Juan revealed that he works in both retail and at a restaurant. These two jobs are often associated with different skills that Juan feels will assist him in both the work and academic world. Juan mentioned that he is trying to "diversify" himself and that these new skills will "open doors."

Shannon was motivated by financial success considerations and the hope of “something more”:

Knowing that I'll get a really good job when I get my diploma is an excellent motivator. I believe in that because I have a lot of friends who have their degrees and they all have really good-paying jobs and are happy. This way I can buy my own house and have my own family. I'm at a point in my life where I want to get everything on track and do what I have to do to be a better me, do you know what I'm saying? It's like, you know, what you see on TV. Someone who has been through a lot tries to go ahead and succeed. I really want to be that person who comes out on top of it all.

Shannon's comments illustrate that nontraditional students are oftentimes looking for more than just immediate financial gain. In light of the fact that many of them have already earned full-time status at work, they are searching for improvements in their lives. In Shannon's case, she had several health concerns throughout her life. She felt that financial success would be best realized by having individuals around her with whom she could share her happiness. She also relished the idea of being independent. By attaining her college degree, Shannon shared that she can assert her independence by stepping away from her current job at a fast food restaurant and potentially have the option of choosing several different career paths.

Eric's journey is highlighted by what he sees and hears concerning the “real world”:

One day, on my lunch break, I was sitting in the break room listening to the other workers complain and complain about everything that was wrong with the job. This is something that would happen all the time. Most of the employees would just sit around in the break room and complain. But, you know what, nobody

would ever do nothing about it. Finally, I thought to myself, I know that I can do better than this, and I definitely don't want to become one of those people who head over to work every day and hate what I'm doing. Some of the workers had been there for a long time, and some of them just even started. I knew that college would allow me to get on my feet financially and stop working in an environment that was not positive at all.

Eric's case identifies the understanding that nontraditional students often arrive at college with a firm desire to attain a new set of skills. Potentially, these skills will, as was previously mentioned, propel the nontraditional student to gain a promotion at his or her current job, attain a salary increase, or venture into a completely new field. Indeed, this is an incredibly important consideration among nontraditional students, as indicated through the interview data.

Being able to enrich one's skill set, salary, and job prospects is no small matter. More often than not, the interview participants stated that skill enrichment was one of the key reasons why they were propelled to attend college at a later point in their lives. For nontraditional students, college is often the only way to meet these personal imperatives. While some nontraditional students may have come to appreciate these considerations later in life, they are just as important to those who come to understand them at an earlier time. Many held that the college degree is the most important key to the attainment of financial independence. The data in this study suggests that most participants consider financial considerations to be of paramount importance.

Internal provisions.

What a particular college has to offer often sets it apart from other academic institutions. As was mentioned in chapter 2, such things as flexible course options, support services, and

credit for life experiences are, historically, pull factors for nontraditional students (DiSilvestro, 2013; Jenkins, 2009). In this study, 70% of participants indicated that internal provisions were an important factor in their overall decision to apply to college at a later point in their lives. For instance, the interview data demonstrated that optimistic and positive attitudes offered by counselors and staff at the academic institution indeed played a role in the decision to ultimately register. Additionally, the application of remedial or review courses in computers, mathematics, and English were also found to be helpful by a number of participants. A representative example is illustrated through the comments connected with Cody and Anthony.

Cody's experience was unique in that after having graduated high school, he enlisted in the United States Navy. After serving for several years, Cody returned home with the honor of a soldier, but with very few job prospects. It was then that he began to review his choices concerning higher education.

I pretty much knew that I wanted to go to college, but once I finished with the military I realized that I had to start getting myself together. The cool thing about the military is that they have a special program where, if I went to a state school, I did not have to pay tuition. The first thing I did was look at the state schools that were near my town. There were two. I looked at both of their websites and then called up to see if I could meet with someone at each school. It actually worked out where I could see both schools during the same week. To be honest, the people I talked to were pretty nice at both places. But the school I picked was a better choice for me because it had more weekend classes. I was trying to earn some money, and I worked a lot during the week. This does sound kind of crazy,

but the weekend was actually the best time for me to take my classes, plus my sister was living with me, and I was trying to help her out.

Cody's comments shed light on the fact that the availability of courses is an important factor for nontraditional students. This is important because nontraditional students, as was mentioned earlier through the factor of financial considerations, often have work-related concerns that may coincide with their academics. Being able to take courses in the evenings and on weekends was something that most participants in this study mentioned as being of high importance. Moreover, the positive interactions with college/university faculty and staff also plays a role in the ultimate enrollment decision.

Anthony's experiences with internal provisions also referenced some important reasons why nontraditional students were pulled towards colleges and universities:

The location is pretty good. I am close to home so if I need to do anything to help my family, I can do that. Another thing is that it does offer a lot of different times for classes. Sometimes I need to take a class at night, and those are available.... I took a placement test and did okay on the English part, but I did not pass the math section. The guy who was giving me the test told me not to worry. I was still able to attend college, but had to take a lower-level class to work on what I needed.

That was not really what I wanted to hear at the time, but looking back at it, the class did help me learn stuff that was needed as I kept going.

Anthony's comments were indicative of the majority of participants in the study. In fact, 70% of participants had to take at least one remedial class before placing into a full-credit course. While most admitted that they did not want to do this, in retrospect, the majority agreed that the class was indeed beneficial and helped them to gain important skills that they would need throughout

the rest of their time in college. Overall, 40% of participants took either a summer intensive course or abbreviated program with a focus on college success skills. Having developed and instructed several of these courses, the researcher is aware that the curriculum for most of these courses often centers on notetaking skills, time management, and the effective use of technology for college. Most of the participants in the study indicated that this type of course, especially the parts of the course that focused on computer applications, was both helpful and connected to other academic courses in myriad ways.

Participant statements indicated that what supportive resources an academic institution has to offer may certainly influence the enrollment considerations of nontraditional students. Flexible classes, positive attitudes from both faculty and staff, and meaningful courses that help to address any gap in the knowledge base of a nontraditional student were found to be both helpful and timely.

Push Factors

Financial constraints.

Data analysis will now shift into an examination of push factors, which are those factors that initially pushed nontraditional students away from applying to college. Financial constraints were uncovered through both statistical and interview data. Financial constraints are the reasons why finances often deter nontraditional students from attending college. This is different than financial considerations as a pull factor, which are positive reasons why financial concerns play a role in attracting nontraditional students to college. Data indicates that more often than not, the fear of paying back the overall cost of college coupled with the ambiguous nature of financial aid and its process played a significant role for many participants in this study. The cases of Troy,

Christian, Anthony, and Cody serve to illustrate the varying degrees of challenge associated with this push factor.

Troy's experiences illustrated his hopeful nature, tempered by realism.

Yes, the cost is an issue. Finances, I mean, you know, money does not grow on trees. I almost wish that all colleges were priced at the level of community colleges. Tuition is pretty expensive. But, you know what, at the same time, I think I'm at the point now in my educational career where you just have to do the best you can and hope that you have the potential for scholarships. My plan is to try and put some money aside so that I can pay off some of my debt in the end.

Troy's plan is to "put some money aside" in order to pay off some of the debt that has accrued. Like Troy, other participants in the study were surprised by the disparity concerning tuition associated with community colleges and traditional four-year colleges, especially private colleges. A number of participants indicated that because competition is fierce at private academic institutions, it was more challenging to attain certain scholarships. More than half of the participants (60%) were hesitant to take out too many loans linked to financial aid for fear of the inability to pay them back.

Christian felt that the financial end was out of his hands:

I really didn't have any plan. A few years ago, I did not want to have anything to do with it. I didn't have a lot of money as it was to be taking out more loans.

What turned me around me was that I had to stop and think about what was going to be important for me in the long run. I got down to the financial aid people, and I gave them all of the papers that they were asking for. What they did was, they

had me wait a few days. Finally, I got a call from them asking me to come back down in order for me to go over all of the papers with them. I was a little bit nervous, to be honest, because I had never gone through this type of stuff before; I didn't know if they checked out your credit or looked at how long you were employed. I don't think any of that came into it. Come to find out, I ended up getting a pretty good deal. They gave me a mix of grants, scholarships, and financial aid. So, even though I wasn't an expert in all that, it wasn't so bad.

Christian's experience is not uncommon. Other participants reported walking into the financial aid process without any formal awareness of how the process works. The evidence exemplifies that most nontraditional students have been out of high school, where the financial aid process is most commonly discussed, for a number of years. Moreover, Christian's response indicated something that is evident for many nontraditional students: being currently saddled with bills and debt that put them in a less than desirable financial position.. Be that as it may, after becoming more informed of the financial aid process, many nontraditional students in this study realized that the pros often outweigh the cons.

Anthony's response appears to be most indicative of the participants as a whole:

I did not know anything about financial aid when I got to college. My cousin told me a little bit about it because he had taken some college classes awhile back. But I did not really know anything about the process. The counselor told me what I had to do, and I filled out all the papers. I have been trying to save a little bit to pay off some of what I owe. I know it is probably going to be a lot in the end but I just have to keep thinking that it's worth it.

Sixty percent of participants indicated that they were attempting to put some money away in order to alleviate their tuition debt burden. In addition, 70 % of study participants realized that overall what they are doing was going to be financially worth it in the long run. In other words, they would hopefully command a salary that would enable them to pay off their tuition debts in a fairly reasonable amount of time. It can be gleamed from the participants' response that hope allowed them to continue with the financial aid process and not wrap themselves in a cloak of anxiety concerning mounting tuition debt. Also, 60 % of participants indicated that after the first year it was foolhardy to stop now with the considerable number of credits they already attained.

Cody's advice on this issue was unique yet effective for his purposes. Cody, as previously mentioned, had served in the United States Navy for several years. As a result, he did not have to pay tuition at any state-run academic institution.

Believe me, I'm glad that I served in the military. I'm glad that I served for a lot of reasons, but having the opportunity to get an education without worrying about all of the debt was definitely a plus. I think that most people who are worried about the debt should look into some of the programs offered by the government through the military. Sometimes weekend programs are available for people so it's less of a time commitment. It's not really as hard as everybody thinks, and some of these programs will pay for all or part of your tuition.

It is important to note 70% of participants reported being unaware of available scholarships and other opportunities that might be able to offset their tuition debt. Two participants revealed that individuals in the financial aid office talked with them about various scholarships that might be

available to nontraditional students. However, these two participants were clearly the exception, as 70 % were unaware of this option.

An analysis of the overall data indicates that financial constraints were a strong push factor concerning nontraditional students. Many have been out of high school for many years and are unfamiliar with the process. The participant interviews suggested that this causes a strong degree of anxiety among nontraditional students because they were unaware of how the process works. Only after meeting with financial aid counselors and other admissions staff, that study were study participants far more comfortable with the financial aid process and how it directly impacted them.

Technological unfamiliarity.

Technological unfamiliarity is another push factor that has an important role to play in the hesitancy regarding nontraditional students and their enrollment in college. It is fair to say that technological change happens quite rapidly in our society (Keith, 2007; Levin 2007). The evidence from this study suggests that this unfamiliarity becomes more pronounced as one becomes older and continues to receive no technological training. This is evidenced through the statistical and interview data garnered through this study. Forty percent of participants, all of whom were over the age of 30, expressed having challenges with technology--a direct result of their time without training. However, the study also yielded the fact that older participants, with opportunities to practice, were able to grasp rudimentary computer applications and functions such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The narratives of Louise, Rose, and Juan serve to typify this consideration. What this exemplifies is that the opportunities to practice technological skills were beneficial for many nontraditional students. By working with a trained professional at a college or university, they were able to enhance their overall skills and performance.

Louise, one of the study's older participants, recounted her experiences with technology:

People always get a kick out of it when I tell them this. For my first couple of classes I used a typewriter in order to complete my assignments. One day, one of my professors sat next to me before the beginning of class. I was always an early bird and got there at least 20 minutes early or more. He was very kind. He told me that he appreciated my hard work and that he was wondering if I would be willing to sign up for computer class. I'll be honest: I was waiting for this to happen. I did not really have much experience with computers. I was a pretty good typist, but long gone are those good old days. I ended up taking the computer class, and I couldn't believe my eyes. There were people in that class older than me! I was glad about that. The class did help me, and I actually made some friends too.

Louise's experience typifies those of others within this study. What is more, an additional 40 % indicated that there was a gap in their knowledge regarding technology and select computer and Internet applications. In fact, two participants admitted trying to skirt around the issue by handing in either hand-written documents or asking family members to do the typing at home for them.

Rose, another nontraditional student and a senior citizen, (i.e., over the age of 65), shared her experiences with technology:

My husband and I went out and bought our kids a computer several years ago. I would walk by the computer every day and see them typing, playing games, and chatting with their friends. I think it was then that my husband and I decided to see if any classes were available where we could learn also. I would've had my children teach me, but they had such busy schedules. Finally, finally, after a long

wait, we found a class that was being offered at the local high school. I thought the course was pretty helpful. My husband and I were teaching each other things that we might've forgotten in class. And when I started taking college classes, the stuff that I learned from the computer class came in handy.

Sixty percent of study participants indicated that they took a computer class, or had some type of computer training before attending college. To that end, these same participants reported that they learned some skills that were applicable to their college coursework. Most indicated that programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint were the most important functions associated with their computer and technology classes. However, other participants stated that they became skilled in art, drawing, and graphics through more advanced computer classes that they took before and during their time in college.

Juan's experiences offer a third perspective on the importance of technology for nontraditional students:

I had difficulty using the computer when I first started off taking my classes. The one thing that I learned was that the more I practiced, the better I became with the computer. I was able to save up and buy an older laptop at home. The more I practiced with that I learned more too. My cousin would also come by, and we would work on things together. He was taking classes at college also.

The idea of practicing a skill in order to grasp a better attainment of that skill is an overall imperative. The evidence gathered from the interview data in this study suggests that, more often than not, even though certain nontraditional students have been out of practice with newer technology, it did not take a substantial amount of effort in order for them to achieve their aims.

This is evidenced by Juan who reported the following: “Before long, I was able to catch on to the new stuff. I worked with friends and family, but I was able to learn a lot on my own, too.”

Although technological unfamiliarity and inexperience can be considered a push factor, the evidence gathered here suggests that opportunities abound for nontraditional students to remediate or acquaint themselves with regard to this potential deficit in their learning. Once one has begun working through the process, they were able to begin successfully understanding the necessary functions of technology and how to apply them in myriad ways to their work in college. Moreover, by having a working familiarity with these technological skills, nontraditional students of all ages were able to prepare themselves for what is needed outside the walls of academia.

Self -Confidence

Self-confidence issues were shared via seven participants in the study. While 30% of participants suggested that they had little to no issues with regard to their self-confidence, 70% identified at least moderate issues with regard to self-confidence. As stated in Chapter 2, the studies show nontraditional students have been linked to self-confidence issues (DiSilvestro, 2013; Lahr, 2007). For this theme, three case studies, those of Shannon, Eric, and Lori, will be analyzed.

Shannon’s self-confidence issues were unique to this study. She was the only participant to readily admit that she had a number of mental and physical health concerns, which, to varying degrees, impacted her initial decision not to attend college directly out of high school. They also have caused concern with many decisions that she has made throughout her life:

Sometimes I do feel bad about myself. I try to keep saying that things are going to be OK. It’s never good to be depressed. Especially when your family is around

and you can affect other people as well. I never really thought of it like that, but maybe I did not apply earlier because I didn't think that I would do a good job.

Shannon shared that she recently sought treatment for her depression and was encouraged by her doctor to apply to college. Shannon reported that overcoming her depression had a powerful impact on her life. It was always something that she wanted to do but felt as though she could not do it. After doing well academically during her first semester in college, Shannon reported that she started having better days in her life.

For Eric, his self-confidence concerns reportedly stemmed from his environment:

When you live and work in a place where people have never achieved all that much, you start to think that you're just like them. I grew up in a neighborhood where there was a lot of crime. Nobody in my whole neighborhood had money. And I didn't think about all that then. My family did what they could to help us, but we never had much. "Surviving," that's what my mom used to call it. It was the same way when I was going through high school. None of the kids that I hung around with thought that they were college material. And that grows on you. For a long time, I didn't ever think I would be where I am now.

Eric's comments illustrated how a deficit in self-confidence can limit nontraditional students and their pursuit of higher education.

Lori's comments echo those of Eric's in that many factors impact self-confidence:

Because I had my daughter, I did not apply to college. Looking back, I'm not really sure that I would've applied anyway. A lot of my friends were not going, and I probably would not have gone either but I'm not sure. I have had some self-

esteem issues in the past because I was always overweight. I'm not sure, though, that that connected to going to college in any way. Besides, I would have also had to take special GED classes in order to even apply. So, I'm really not sure.

While not directly stated by Lori, it does appear from her statement that self-confidence issues pertaining to her weight impacted her self-confidence. She also mentioned that she was not sure how well she would have done academically. Moreover, as was the case with Eric, because her friends were not going to college, Lori did not decide to go at that point either. The data collected from all of the participants in the study suggested that the individuals around us often have a direct impact on the personal decisions that we make as well as our own self-esteem and self-confidence. Of course, that impact can be a promoted in a positive or negative way.

Results from this study indicate that self-confidence is a clear push factor for nontraditional students. Making the initial decision to not attend college after high school, nontraditional students in this study are often in a fluid point of consideration as to when they will take the next steps. As the evidence from this research study concludes, as time goes by, it oftentimes becomes increasingly more challenging for nontraditional students to re-enter the classroom. Other considerations and options along life's path intercede. Indeed, as the previously examined statements of both Lois and Rose have indicated, the knowledge gap widens with each passing year. By way of exemplification, certain nontraditional students are afraid that they do not have the necessary skills to compete with those already in college and this, assuredly, impacted their overall self-confidence and esteem. This is evidenced through Eric's recollection of the following: "I headed down to North Carolina to find work. I was not thinking about college then; I was not even sure I was able to do the work." Eric continued to talk about how he

was not confident in his abilities and had wished he registered for college earlier because he had forgotten many of his previously learned skills. This, in turn, had a direct impact on his overall confidence.

Summary

In sum, the analysis of data offered important understandings to the research questions. The first research question is as follows:

1. What factors draw nontraditional students towards applying to college?

Data from this study indicated that the factors of love of learning, familial considerations, financial considerations, and internal provisions all, to varying degrees, draw nontraditional students towards applying to college. When asked to select which factor was the most important with regard to applying to college later in life, the results in Figure 6 that were obtained are illustrated through the following:

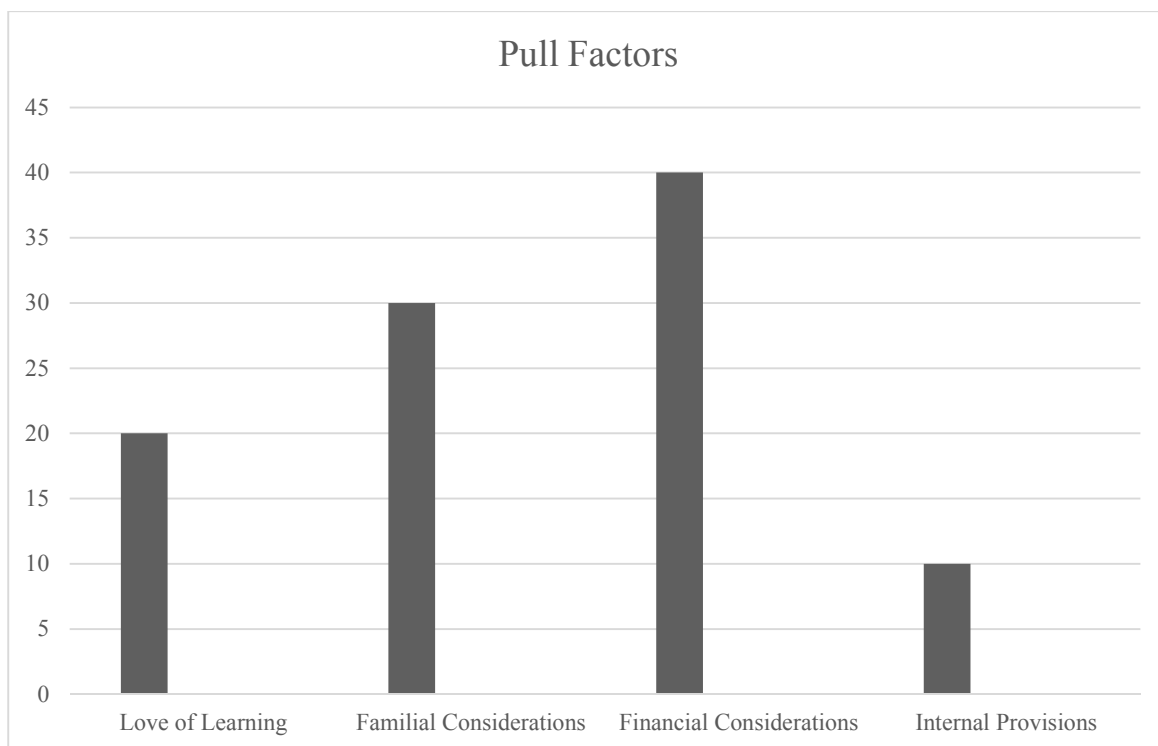


Figure 10. Pull Factors

The bar graph above highlights the fact that, overall, participants were not unanimous in their selection of which pull factor was most important to them. Forty percent of participants noted that financial considerations were the most important reason why they returned to college at a later point in their lives. Thirty percent of participants noted that familial considerations were the most important reason why they returned to college at a later point in their lives. These two factors, then, account for 70% of the participants. Moreover, love of learning accounted for 20% of the responses and internal provisions 10%. This data serves to solidify the fact that no one factor propels nontraditional students to college. Clearly, an array of factors play a role in the decision to attend college at a later point in their lives.

The second research question is as follows:

2. What factors draw nontraditional students away from applying to college? Data from this study indicated that financial constraints, technological unfamiliarity, and self-confidence all play a pivotal role in drawing nontraditional students away from applying to college.

The following data highlights the previous point. When asked what factor played the most important role in drawing nontraditional students away from attending college, the bar graph (Figure 11), illustrates the results that were obtained.

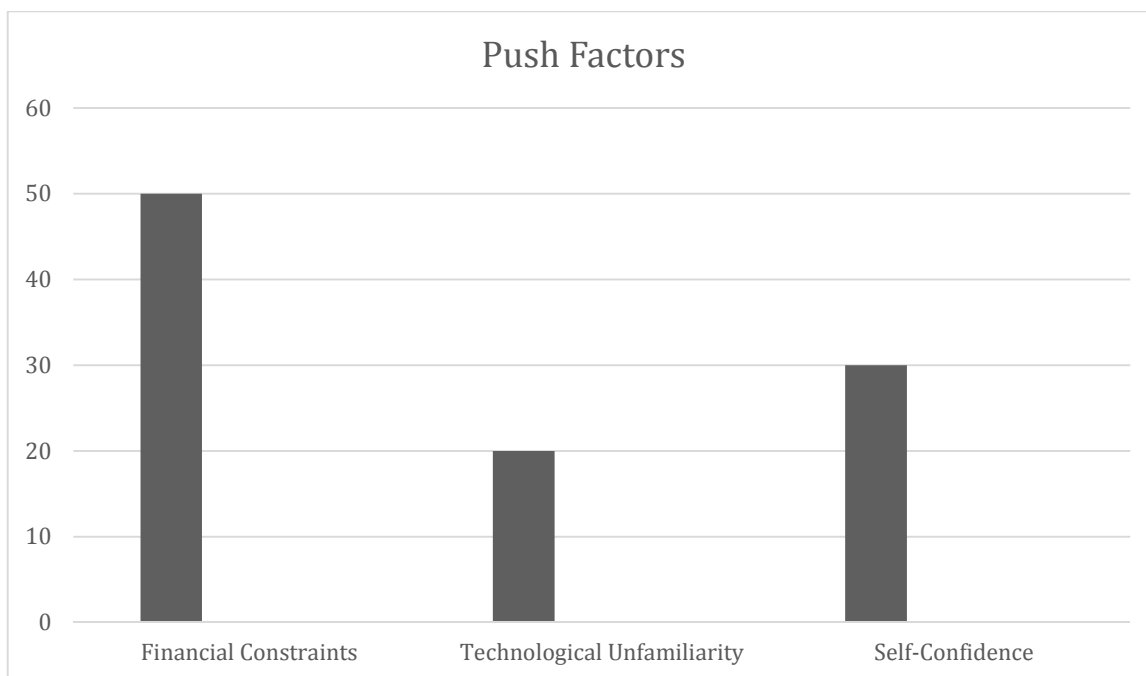


Figure 11. Push Factors.

Here again, the data illustrates that even though financial constraints play a major role, technological unfamiliarity and self-confidence also have important roles to play as factors which have dissuaded nontraditional students from attending college. Financial constraints were the most important dissuading factor accounted, accounting for 50% of participant responses. The previously mentioned interview data would support that finding. More, because more often than not, participants would report on their overall concerns as to how they would pay for their college tuitions. Concerning self-confidence, 30% of participants described this factor as being most important. Finally, technological unfamiliarity was the primary push factor for 20% of participants.

The hypothesized factors were indeed validated by both survey and interview data. That data, gathered through the evidence of participants of various ages, genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic status, serves to provide a clear understanding as to why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives.

This information is important for high schools, colleges and universities, and educational leaders in order to give them a fuller understanding of what the current needs are for nontraditional students. By understanding these specific needs, the individuals who assist them will be better able to address these needs. Moreover, by being able to recognize what works best for this population, educational leaders at all levels may create programs that will allow for nontraditional students to achieve success in myriad areas. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter illustrates the importance of this particular study by providing an overview of the findings and how they can best be addressed in a practical and functional way by those in educational leadership. Importantly, having a better understanding of this phenomenon allows for educational leaders to put action plans regarding nontraditional students into place on various levels. Plans concerning overall needs would depend on the institution's population. Hopefully, those action plans would result in increased enrollment and allow for nontraditional students to engage in further opportunities. Moreover, by working with other nontraditional students and understanding policy, this group can harness an awareness of how to address any potential concerns that might arise.

Problem & Purpose

The problem presented in this study concerns nontraditional students and the reasons why they have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. To understand what ultimately drew or dissuaded nontraditional students from attending college is important for outreach efforts concerning various academic institutions. Moreover, after attaining a stronger conception and analysis of the phenomenon, ensuing action steps would result in increased enrollment. Conversely, without a firm understanding of the factors that contribute to nontraditional students attending college, academic institutions are missing an opportunity to potentially enhance the lives of an ever-growing population. Evidence of this is supported by recent findings which asserted that over 8 million undergraduate students currently studying in the United States are at

least 24 years of age or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Accordingly, the problem of addressing these critical factors is both significant and timely.

The purpose of this multi-case study was to determine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. Surveys and in-depth interviews were administered in order for participants to elaborate on their reasons for applying to college at a later point in their lives. As a result, this process yielded relevant data to help educational leaders and institutions of higher learning in determining what factors are at play when nontraditional students are considering applying to college. The results of the study will help institutions of higher learning make progress with regard to current successes associated with nontraditional students. The findings of the study will also assist in making improvements concerning those areas with which nontraditional students are finding substantial challenges.

Findings

The research revealed multiple push and pull factors that contribute to the overall decision of whether or not a nontraditional student is going to attend college. For 30% of the participants, personal factors such as self-esteem and wanting to be a strong role model for their children was a major reason as to why they began attending college. For other participants, (50%) economic factors such as getting a promotion at work or a salary increase were among the top reasons why they decided to attend. Finally, 20% of participants went to college in order to focus on a subject that they never had the opportunity to study previously. All this noted, it is important to point out that every participant had multiple reasons influencing his or her own unique aspirations that connected to attending college.

Pull Factor Summaries

Love of Learning

The first pull factor to be considered is love of learning. It was not surprising to find that love of learning was the most important pull factor for the two oldest participants in the study. Both of these women were over the age of 65, and both attended college considerably later in life. Although one of the women, Rose, went back in order to fulfill a personal goal, once she finished attaining that goal, she went on to take additional classes simply because she enjoyed learning new things. Louise, the other participant, was never enrolled in a degree or certificate program. She would select classes with which she had an interest and attend on a regular basis. Both of these examples add support to the consideration that certain nontraditional students attend college for an overall love of learning.

A further consideration associated with love of learning concerns age. As was illustrated through the current study, those nontraditional students who take on college classes simply for a love of learning are usually of retirement age. Many of these individuals participate in programs that are offered by their respective states which offset or fully fund their enrollment in the courses. As is often a condition, those retirees do not receive actual college credit for the course. These individuals would audit the course and possibly work out an arrangement with the professor with regard to attendance and assessments. This way, these nontraditional students are still allowed to learn about topics of interest; however, they are going about the academic process in a slightly different way.

A final piece to love of learning is associated with the future. An extension of the love of learning factor deals with the love of the position or future position in their lives. This deep interest in a career has compelled them to go back to school to foster a greater understanding of

this love. For instance, early childhood education was mentioned as an area with which at least one participant was passionate. It was her deep interest in this area, having increased during her time working at a daycare facility, that compelled her to attend college. Another participant mentioned his passionate interest in art and drawing as a motivating factor with regard to attending college. As a result, one can discern that love of learning has an important role to play in the lives of nontraditional students.

Familial Considerations

Concerning familial considerations, every participant mentioned at least one family member whom they hoped to influence as a result of his or her own personal journey to college. Interestingly, although many participants mentioned a son or daughter as the individual they wanted to influence, 30% mentioned a younger brother or sister who was currently enrolled in K-12 education. Often mentioned was the fact that these young people live in an environment where attending college is not necessarily a priority. At least half of the participants noted the fact that there were very few people in their lives who encouraged them to attend college. As a result, especially for the participants who did not have children of their own, they wanted to encourage younger family members to not make the same missteps that they themselves made in their lives.

Familial considerations brought forth an array of important considerations that weave into self-confidence issues. This is exemplified by the fact that through using the skills that they garner in college, nontraditional learners can assist others in their families. This gave all participants a strong sense of self-worth. Apparently, helping others learn new tasks and skills is something that many of these individuals have not had the opportunity to frequently do in their lives. Another point deals with parenting, at least 30 % of the participants were single parents.

This brought forth an entirely new perspective in that these students had unique challenges that often coincided with technological or financial concerns. These individuals had to deal with concerns regarding child care and how best to raise their children while, at the same time, attempting to improve their own lives by attending college. For instance, as many of the participants' children are in their pre-teenage years, it was incumbent upon the participants to find suitable arrangements for the children while they were at work on taking college classes. Interestingly, at least two participants admitted to taking their children to class with them because that had no other suitable arrangements. Overall, this factor is one that can potentially be explored through both qualitative and quantitative research. Moreover, a mixed methods approach, similar to the current research, might effectively be employed, as well.

Financial Considerations

Financial considerations are the prevailing pull factor with regard to this research. Eighty percent of participants described how important it was for them to find a successful job or career once they finished college. Additionally, it was reported by a majority of the 80% that they would be able to attain most of their goals in life by having a college degree. The belief in success being associated with economic considerations was mentioned through interview data by 80% of participants. Moreover, the idea of attending college in order to leave a job where the overall culture is unpleasant was also mentioned by 30% of participants. This evidence suggests that nontraditional students are not only looking for a job that pays well, but want to work in an atmosphere that cultivates achievement, success, and overall happiness.

Internal Provisions

The factor of internal provisions does play a role in the decision-making process of nontraditional students as evidenced through the participant interviews. Though not necessarily the most important pull factor, 60 % of the participants mentioned this as being of at least some importance. As previously mentioned, 70% of participants noted that the upbeat personality traits demonstrated by employees of the college, especially those who were directly servicing the participants, did indeed make an impact. Moreover, participants found that they felt more comfortable when an individual presented himself or herself in a friendly and knowledgeable way. Additionally, at least 50% of participants mentioned the combination of flexible classes and online classes as something that they found appealing with regard to internal provisions. In the same way, 50% of participants mentioned that weekend classes were particularly helpful, especially since many nontraditional students hold jobs that require them to work during the week.

Push Factors

Financial Constraints

While all of the previously mentioned factors, to some degree, played a role in drawing nontraditional students to attend college, there are other factors which pushed nontraditional students away from applying to, and eventually attending, college. Notably, 80% of participants mentioned in their interviews that the escalating costs of college tuition played a role in their ultimate decision not to apply to college directly out of high school. Moreover, 50% of participants listed financial constraints as the *overall* reason why they did not initially attend college. Additionally, when asked what might keep them from finishing their current degree or certificate program, 40% of participants mentioned financial constraints as the major reason.

This evidence gives support to the understanding that nontraditional students have concerns regarding their own financial futures. Eighty percent of the participants do not live on their own and rely on income from either a partner or family member in order to pay the costs of housing and utilities. As a result, the evidence suggests that financial constraints are a prime push factor that has a direct overall impact on nontraditional students.

Technological Unfamiliarity

Technological unfamiliarity was a factor of concern for at least 40% of the participants in this study. Another 30% of participants expressed some degree of discomfort when asked about their comfort level with use of technology; however, it was not necessarily a factor that caused them to decide against initially applying to college. As mentioned earlier, two participants in this research study are over the age of 65. Interestingly, even though both women admitted they were out of practice with technology for decades, they both approached the learning of new technological applications with an open mind. The statistical data suggested that those who have not used word processing and various computer-based applications within the last five years were more likely to have trepidation in using technology. The 40% of participants who mentioned technology as a concern do not have computers at home; indeed, at least 30% perform functions at work that do not require them to have any type of association with technology. Therefore, the evidence cements the fact that regular use of technological applications, such as computers and Internet functions, helps to or alleviate feelings of unfamiliarity among nontraditional students.

Self-Confidence

The findings in this research study illustrated that a lack of self-confidence was clearly a factor of concern for participants. As previously stated, 70% of participants mentioned in their interviews that their overall lack of self-confidence played a role in their decision not to initially apply to college. While the circumstances of each individual were likely different, the overarching belief that they were unable to succeed in college was similar. For instance, 30% of participants mentioned external factors such as lack of support from family members, or living in a demographic area where achieving success through college was not necessarily an imperative, as reasons that impacted their self-confidence. Additionally, another 20% of participants mentioned internal factors such as a lack of self-worth or being unmotivated as reasons why they did not initially apply to college. Interestingly, in all of the aforementioned cases, at a certain point, acts of encouragement from others helped to propel these individuals to rethink their prior considerations and move forward with applying. In 80% of those cases, the individual who provided the encouragement was either a college graduate or currently taking college courses.

Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation of findings with regard to this research study served to extend knowledge in the discipline as it relates to Malcolm Knowles's Andragogy in Practice Model (1998). The model, which is currently used by educational theorists and educational leaders, serves as an "enhanced conceptual framework" by examining various ways in which domains of adult learning and can be best understood (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001, p. 80). The Andragogy in Practice Model, an in-depth description of which appears in chapter 2 of this study, has three overall dimensions: 1) goals and purposes for learning, 2) individual and situational differences, and 3) andragogy: core adult learning principles (Knowles, Holton, &

Swanson, 2015). The second dimension, *individual and situational differences*, was the primary focus for the research conducted in the study. Within the individual and situational differences dimension of the Andragogy in Practice Model, three subfields exist: 1) subject-matter differences, 2) situational differences, and 3) individual learner differences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). The research conducted in this study directly associated itself with the situational differences subcategory, which are described thus: “This group of factors connects andragogy with the socio-cultural influences now accepted as a core part of each learning situation” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 84). Moreover, Knowles goes on to point out the following: “The andragogical model is the system of elements that can be adopted and adapted in many ways. It is not an ideology that must be applied totally and without modification. In fact, an essential feature of andragogy is flexibility” (Holton et al., 2001, p. 128). Through this, one can interpret that Knowles wanted researchers to adapt his model to the ever-changing nature of society. In other words, factors that might have influenced nontraditional learners to attend or not attend college decades ago may not necessarily be of any relevance in current society. As a result, the situational differences need to be revisited on a continual basis in order to determine what influences, both positive and negative, are impacting nontraditional learners. As a result of this consideration, a reoccurring gap would exist in the literature unless researchers examine these differences and draw conclusions and recommendations concerning how to best serve nontraditional learners as it relates to college access. The findings in this research study served to bridge that gap by examining contemporary factors that were brought forth not only in the literature, but also through survey and interview data.

The current findings, when compared to previous findings in the literature review, offer insightful interpretations. With regard to love of learning, previous studies suggested that

approximately 30% of students do not follow a strict academic plan (National Education Statistics, 2017). In the current research, 20% of participants did not follow a strict academic plan. This data point illustrates a certain degree of validity when compared to previously conducted studies in that the percentages are fairly close even though a smaller pool of participants was used in the current study. Additionally, love of learning was described in the academic literature as especially appealing to those individuals over the age of 60 who wanted to return to school to learn new pieces of information and to expand their knowledge base (Kudak, 2016; Lahr, 2007). The interviews and survey data conducted in this research also aligned with this view.

A comparison of the previously conducted research and the current research study shows a connection pertaining to familial considerations. Prior research suggested that being a role model for an individual in one's family was especially important for nontraditional learners (Baptista, 2011; Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2017; Fragoso, 2013). In the current study, 100% of participants suggested that being enrolled in college allowed them to be viewed as a role model for other individuals in their families. The slight difference here is that 30 % of the participants in the current research mentioned a younger sibling as the individual for whom their influence had the greatest impact. Sixty percent of the participants in the current study did not have children. As a result, these individuals sought to influence a younger brother or sister with their pursuit to attend college. It can be interpreted that imparting these important goals and ideas onto their younger loved ones was of great significance to nontraditional learners.

A comparative interpretation of findings between previous studies and this study concerning the factor of financial considerations are aligned. Previous research highlighted the fact that financial considerations are one of the most important factors for nontraditional students

(Chung et al., 2017; DiSilvestro, 2013; Kim & Baker, 2015). In the same way, this factor was ranked among the highest with regard to its overall importance through the data in the previous chapter. While each of the past research studies was carefully selected for its relevance in relationship to the current research, some of the studies were conducted over a decade ago. What this suggests is that financial considerations have been, and still are, an important factor for nontraditional students. While the economic climate in the United States might fluctuate, the overall desire to establish some degree of economic security is, as evidenced by current and past research, a factor of high importance. In other words, nontraditional students often enroll in college in order to prepare themselves for economic success later in life.

The internal provisions, or what offerings a college might provide that somehow interests nontraditional students, is another factor of importance. One direct connection between this study and past examinations concerns flexible course options. Previous studies have indicated that nontraditional students prefer to take classes in the evenings and on weekends because these classes would not necessarily interfere with their work schedules (Jenkins, 2009; Ransdell, 2014). The current study uncovered similar considerations. While some participants asserted that flexible course options were not necessarily an issue for them because they had an open schedule, 50% of participants mentioned that available classes that met in the evenings or on weekends was something they found appealing. Moreover, the reason for this mirrors past studies (Kim & Baker, 2015; Lahr, 2007). The same 50% of participants mentioned that it is because of their work schedules that they look for classes that meet in the evenings, usually after 5 PM, or on weekends. Something unique to the current research that was uncovered through the factor of internal provisions is related to the personality traits of the individuals with whom nontraditional students come into contact. While past studies have described nontraditional

students appreciating assistance from various staff members, little has been described with regard to the overall personality traits of those individuals (Keith, 2007; Kudak, 2016). In fact, 70% of participants in the study indicated that they were more likely to register for classes if the individual assisting him or her had a positive attitude and pleasant demeanor. Moreover, 40% of participants felt at least some degree of reluctance to apply, or finalize the application process, if they were assisted by someone who appeared to be disinterested or did not display optimism with regard to the overall process. What can be interpreted here is that nontraditional learners often need encouragement throughout the college admissions process. As was previously mentioned, many come from personal situations where encouragement is not necessarily something that is offered on a regular basis. Accordingly, being encouraged through this process is a welcomed change.

Financial constraints found in this study emulate what is already written in the literature. One key finding that directly connected to many of the research studies concerned the full-time and part-time status of nontraditional students. The previous studies examined in the literature review hold that most nontraditional students will attend college on a part-time basis until they attain their degree or certificate. The reason associated with this has to do with the overall amount of money that nontraditional students are willing to pay per semester. This finding was verified through the current research study (Kim & Baker, 2015; Levin 2007). Interestingly, 80% of participants are currently attending college on a part-time basis. Most participants (60%), will take no more than two classes each semester (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Again, the reason why nontraditional students are not taking a full course load each semester connects to financial constraints. Two points appeared to be associated with this consideration. First, 40% of participants mentioned that the more classes they take, the higher their tuition bill

will be at the end of the semester. Second, nontraditional students often have specific bills and obligations that need to be paid on a regular basis. By spending more time taking classes, the students are spending less time at work. This, in turn, impacts their paychecks. Regardless, 50% of participants mentioned the possibility of attending classes full-time if they were able to attain some type of scholarship or grant funding. This way, they would not have to worry about debt being accrued at the end of each semester.

Technological unfamiliarity is yet a further factor that was studied through the literature review, and is found among the findings of this study. Historically, technological unfamiliarity has been a barrier for nontraditional students. Many are afraid to return to the classroom after being away for so many years and recognize that a gap exists concerning technology (Barr, 2016; Ruff, 2011). The current research study adds to the literature in that 70% of participants mentioned at least some hesitancy associated with technology. Forty percent of the participants had a serious concern with the overall use of technology, and 30% of the participants mentioned a moderate or minor concern connected with technology. This data is in line with prior studies that have suggested that these technological barriers do exist for nontraditional students. What was uncovered through the interview data is that while 70% mentioned having some sort of training, 30% of this same group received training at home from a friend or relative. The fact that nontraditional students receive training and assistance at home is something that has not been mentioned in the previous literature used in regard to this study. Moreover, this consideration is in line with the personal comfort level connected with nontraditional students that was mentioned previously in the internal provisions section of these findings.

Self-confidence as a barrier for nontraditional students has long been researched and analyzed (DiSilvestro, 2013; Munro, 2011; Trowler, 2015). The current research study found

several key findings related to self-confidence as it connects to nontraditional students. One of the recurring points in the literature was that nontraditional students sometimes experience anxiety due to the fact that they may be much older than many of the individuals in their classes (Ross-Gordon, 2003; Lahr, 2007). However, no participants in the current research study mentioned this as an area of concern. In fact, 60% of participants mentioned that many of the individuals taking the same classes appeared to be around their age. With that being the case, it was reported that prior to taking classes, 30% of participants mentioned that this might be an issue; however, that fear was quickly assuaged once they began attending classes. Here again, interpretation of multiple factors come into play. A major consideration in the internal provisions factor was availability of evening courses. Research suggests that most individuals who take evening classes offered after 5 PM are nontraditional students (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). This data point serves to highlight the fact that nontraditional students taking evening classes would, most likely, be in classes with other nontraditional students. A further key point of these findings deals with overall self-confidence playing a role in the application decision (Lahr, 2007; Munro, 2011). Forty percent of the participants in the study mentioned that self-confidence issues played a role with their decision to not apply to college earlier in their lives. Twenty percent made mention of the fact that this was an ongoing issue since they graduated high school, and another 20% of participants mentioned that this issue escalated as time went by. This is to say that the gaps in their skills and knowledge, they felt, were increasing with each passing year.

A consideration that was uncovered, but not found in the literature review, was the idea of one's environment as it relates to self-confidence. Thirty percent of participants mentioned their environment played a role in their overall self-confidence. In other words, living in an area

where attainment of a college degree is not recognized or celebrated lowered their self-confidence. Moreover, the same participants made mention of the fact that, in their demographic areas, there were very few people with whom they could discuss their college aspirations, and at the same time, gain insight into the process and procedures connected with the application process. By having little encouragement and no basis for comparison, these individuals, reportedly, experienced a decrease in their overall self-confidence. It was only through personal will or coming into contact with individuals outside of their respective neighborhoods that they gained the confidence to formally begin thinking about the impact that college might have on their lives.

It is evident that many of the findings previously mentioned in this interpretation are clearly connected to the studies and overall findings of past research. Moreover, by coming away with select departures from previously analyzed research, this study is able to recognize the uniqueness of the participants who were studied along with the changing needs of nontraditional students.

Limitations

The limitations of the research concerned the use of a fairly small demographic area in Southern New England as its study site. Although certain participants had life experiences outside of this area, the overall research did not extend beyond these boundaries and, as a result, might have yielded different results than if a more diverse population of participants were included. An additional limitation was the small number of participants. Ten participants were surveyed and interviewed for this study. It has been suggested that a larger number of participants would often yield more robust results and perhaps an increased understanding of the experience. Though important to consider, the rationale behind the selection of only 10

participants dealt with depth. Allowing for 10 in-depth interviews yielded data that assisted in answering the research questions. This would stand in sharp contrast to a larger survey that may yield fewer in-depth responses.

A further consideration was the researcher's access to the participants. It has been reported that, on occasion, findings are compromised when a researcher has certain degrees of familiarity concerning those with whom he or she is interviewing and surveying (Creswell, 2013). In this study, participants were selected, purposefully, from various former students, personal acquaintances, and professional contacts. As a result, a degree of bias might be associated with this because the researcher already is acquainted with the participants. However, this bias was remedied through both member checking and peer debriefing. The researcher ensured that all transcripts were verified for accuracy; all anonymous data was reviewed and discussed with peers. Although limitations have been identified, the safeguards and overall benefits appear to help in dealing with any potential concerns that may arise.

Recommendations

The study of nontraditional learners is vast. Various types of literature exist on the topic, and a copious amount of opportunities for further study present themselves. Certainly, a recommendation for future research can be made that examines a specific age group of nontraditional students. A comparative study could be done where one analyzes the data from nontraditional students over the age of 50, for example. Those data points could be compared with data points from those nontraditional students in the 25-35 age range. This would give a more in-depth understanding to the needs of specific age groups that fall under the umbrella of nontraditional learners. This would be helpful for educational leaders in that they would foster a stronger understanding of what their institutions need to do in order to assist this population.

An additional recommendation would be to carefully examine two or more geographic regions within the United States. One could use both survey and interview data in order to elicit responses and come away with a better understanding as to the similarities and differences regarding the needs of nontraditional learners based on where they live. Concerning the overall benefit for educational scholars and leaders, this study would be helpful in that it could potentially reveal best practices in other parts of the country that they may use in their own academic institutions.

Another recommendation would be to carefully examine one or two specific push or pull factors in relation to nontraditional students. This could be done in a purely qualitative way, through interviews, where the researcher is asking carefully crafted questions regarding that push or pull factor. Moreover, if one did not want to work in interviews, it seems fair to say that theoretical research could be done using various pieces of literature. It appears that, through this current research, financial considerations and implications are the major factors of concern for nontraditional students. These two factors could be easily explored and the research process replicated.

A further recommendation would be to include the considerations exemplified through expectancy theory. Expectancy theory is a theory that deals with the creation of expectations regarding future events (Ananyo, 2010). This theory aligns itself with many important aspects of the current research as it pertains to believing in oneself and one's overall capabilities. A researcher could possibly step away from considerations espoused in adult learning theory and only apply expectancy theory with the same push and pull factors that were used in this study. Interestingly, another possibility would be to compare and contrast the two theories with regard

to nontraditional students. In either case, this approach might be particularly interesting for those wishing to embark upon a purely theoretical study.

A longitudinal study that explores the push and pull factors regarding nontraditional students would, presumably, have a considerable impact on any potential changes concerning needs. A researcher might first identify a group of nontraditional students to use as his or her sample. Next, the researcher could use surveys and interviews as an instrument with which to collect relevant data. The approach that was used in the current research study could be easily replicated in order to accomplish this part of the process. Following the disaggregation of data, the researcher might then be able to meet with the same individuals on a yearly basis and revisit the same questions. After the second round of data is carefully examined, the researcher would be able to potentially discern if any significant changes have taken place on an individual or collective basis. Indeed, if an overarching change has taken place, the researcher might be able to consider this phenomenon and attempt to analyze why this might be happening along with its implications.

An example of this would be indicated through the following: After having conducted a primary interview concerning a select number of nontraditional students, the researcher finds that, during the second interview a year later, their overall stress level has increased. The researcher might attempt to discover why the stress level has increased and if any connection exists that might link the participants. The connection might be longer work hours or heavier course load as the reason for the increase. As a result, further research might be conducted in this particular area.

A final recommendation would be to explore how environmental factors play a role in the lives of nontraditional students. In other words, does personal environment play a role in an

individual's overall decision to attend college? As was previously mentioned, this consideration came up several times in the interviews as something that impacted the self-confidence of many participants. Additionally, many participants made mention of the fact that they did not want their younger loved ones to become products of their environment, and thereby not consider attending college. This would indicate that their overall environment, at least in their perception, does indeed have a role to play. Interestingly, very little was found in the literature concerning this study that discussed the role of one's environment as it relates to nontraditional learners. Questions on the role of environment, as opposed to the role of the overall individual, could be examined here. Perhaps an examination of what extent, or to what degree, do environmental factors play a role in the lives of nontraditional students as it relates to college. This could be explored. In this way, a new factor could be examined, and a better understanding of its importance would be put into place. An educational leader could examine the results of an environmental study and potentially discern what his or her academic institution could do to address the shortcomings of the environment.

Implications

This study promotes implications for practice pertaining to educational leaders in both the K-12 and higher education settings. While the majority of implications likely rests with higher education, K-12 educational leaders also have a role to play in order to gain better understanding of student needs before they become non-traditional learners.

K-12 educational leaders, especially those at the high school level, should ensure that all learners are attaining necessary basic skills. For instance, technological applications should be at the forefront of understanding for all students. This means that students should enter into college with a solid understanding of the most recent technology, and how it is used on the college level.

Moreover, all students should have access to pre-college skills in both English and mathematics. This access is also indicated through the CCSS or Common Core State Standards which highlight college and career readiness as an important goal. The research data from this study is evidenced by the fact that 70% of participants had to take at least one remedial course in English or mathematics while in college because they did not meet the minimum standards in order to be placed in a credit-bearing course. If students were fully prepared with essential college skills after leaving high school, it can be argued that this deficit would be minimized. A best practice for K-12 educational leaders would be to offer students, especially those in 11th and 12th grade, an opportunity to take a college or university-level class directly on a college campus. One example, East Haven High School, partners with a local community college in order to expose high school students to college life. This way, a student is immersed in the college environment and can gain a better understanding of the expectations.

For educational leaders at the higher education level, the implications are more varied. To begin, academic institutions of higher learning should construct a guide for nontraditional students that acts as a one-stop document of essential information access. This guide would seamlessly walk the nontraditional student through the various steps that he or she would need to complete for the college admissions process. For example, the guide could describe the financial aid process, available grants and scholarships, course offerings along with prerequisites, the locations and office hours of counseling services, and, most importantly, any information on individuals who might act as liaisons for nontraditional students.

Another implication for best practices for higher educational leaders would be the establishment of summer programs that help to develop skills that nontraditional students might be lacking. For example, courses in basic college skills, mathematics, and English could be

offered in an abbreviated fashion over the summer; these courses would serve to develop any skill(s) that might be recognized as a deficit through testing or personal communication with the nontraditional student. By presenting this program over the summer months, the institution may show an appreciation of the fact that it is often challenging for nontraditional students to take remedial courses at the same time they are taking traditional credit-bearing courses. Moreover, nontraditional students, after completing the remedial courses with success, would be better prepared to take the traditional credit-bearing courses. This is a program currently in place at several local colleges. The University of Bridgeport offers the Bridge Program which allows for select high school students to take introductory classes in English and mathematics. Since its inception, the program has had a good deal of success concerning student preparation and exposure to academic life. The program could potentially expand to include nontraditional students, too.

An additional institutional recommendation would be connected with affordable housing options. The current study revealed that many nontraditional students lead hectic lives and are often mired in responsibilities at home. Forty percent of interviewees commented on the fact that they, more often than not, step away from their academic responsibilities in order to take care of tasks associated with their families. This, in turn, can have a negative impact on their academic success because they are not primarily focused on their academic growth. This can lead to nontraditional students taking fewer courses or stopping their current educational plans. Moreover, concerning the current study, three participants mentioned the fact that they would attempt to move out of their homes in order to remain more focused and driven if they were afforded the opportunity. Most four-year academic institutions and even some two-year colleges have housing options for students. Allowing nontraditional students the opportunity to live on

their own might be one way to help bolster self-esteem and overall college success. Additionally, it might be advantageous for colleges and universities to incentivize housing for nontraditional students through short-term loans with low interest rates. As was previously noted, nontraditional students are currently taking college courses in record numbers. By finding creative ways to help this rapidly growing population, higher educational institutions are assisting in ways that speak to their overall growth.

A further recommendation would be the creation of a student organization that focuses on nontraditional students. Institutions of higher education should attempt to make every possible effort to include nontraditional students in campus life. This can be true for both two and four-year academic institutions. A counselor or administrator might be able to recruit various nontraditional students through email or by posting flyers for an initial meeting. Next, the administrator could create a survey that addresses the potential needs for nontraditional students. The students could fill out the survey and, through this, the administration would have a certain degree of information with regard to potential needs. For instance, if an administrator found that technological skills were an area for growth concerning this population, he or she might be able to set up tutorial sessions regarding technological skills. This way, nontraditional students would feel that their concerns are being addressed. A further function of a nontraditional student organization would be support. By having nontraditional students come together to talk about issues, concerns, and experiences, they are potentially illustrating a strong sense of connectedness with each other. As was mentioned through the literature associated with this study, many nontraditional students often feel disassociated from other students. By having a potential support group that goes beyond college administrators and counselors, nontraditional students have the opportunity to make connections and foster potential relationships with those

who might have had similar experiences. By way of example, a nontraditional student who might be in his or her second or third year of academic study might be asked to become a guide for an incoming nontraditional student. Here, again, one can envision successes and challenges being discussed in order to make the most out of the overall experience.

An important institutional recommendation would be to examine how best to provide scholarships and grants to nontraditional students. This is important in that financial concerns and considerations were of the highest concern associated with this study. As is often the case, nontraditional students are not attending college on a full-time basis. The result of this is that, more often than not, they are not eligible for financial aid.. This means that nontraditional students are often working full-time and paying for college classes at the same time. What is more, many nontraditional students are trying to provide for their families and pay various other expenses. With the financial deck apparently stacked against them, colleges and universities need to consider how to help. Potential donors or funders might be contacted and scholarships could be created to help offset the overall financial burden that is placed on these students. Students should also be given detailed information as to any and all available grants, both institutional and community-based, that might be applicable. It seems evident that this is necessary because most nontraditional students are unsure of the process. The current research study revealed that 50% of interviewees did not have an acceptable awareness of funding sources with the exception of the FAFSA. Potentially, through grant and scholarship funding, nontraditional students would have the opportunity to take more courses and worry less about the hours they need to work in order to pay off their college courses.

Finally, educational leaders at the higher education level need to be cognizant of the fact that factors concerning nontraditional students often change. Any documentation concerning

nontraditional students should be revisited from time to time in order to ensure that it is meeting the needs of an ever-growing population. Moreover, college and university staff should also have a strong awareness of the various needs associated with nontraditional learners. As was mentioned in this study, the positive interactions that nontraditional students experienced with a host of employees at various academic institutions played a significant role in their overall decision to ultimately register for classes.

Accordingly, educational leaders at all levels need to implement or create practices and policies that serve to bring out the best in nontraditional students. By doing this, educational leaders are helping to serve a population that is rapidly increasing throughout all areas of the United States. Colleges and universities have the potential to increase their overall enrollment, and, perhaps more importantly, help many nontraditional students achieve their goals and dreams by addressing what works best to increase their success in higher education.

Researcher's Thoughts on Study Implications

One clear way to ensure that nontraditional students have the opportunity to have their voices heard is through policy additions. A brief overview of the process would be as follows: A nontraditional student would seek to enact a law that would require all colleges that receive state funding to appoint an individual to act as a liaison for nontraditional students. As was mentioned previously, that individual would help to guide nontraditional students through their college experience in myriad ways. A nontraditional student would have to first convince a legislator that such a law would be needed. Usually, this would be the nontraditional student's own state representative. Then, if the legislator is supportive of the proposition, the legislator would propose a bill. Usually a legislator proposes a bill through his or her own action, or a citizen meets with a legislator and discusses a problem or concern that might be able to be enacted into

law. Next, the bill would probably be granted a hearing, though this is not always the case. Legislators discuss which bills have a certain degree of support with regard to members of the legislature before offering them forward to the particular committee which has oversight. Most states have a General Assembly Education Committee which would probably be the first committee to examine the bill. When a bill is being considered, on the state level it is heard by members of both the house of representative and the senate in a combined committee hearing. In other words, most states do not have separate house and senate committees as is the case in the United States House of Representatives or the United States Senate. Next, if the bill is voted out of committee favorably then it will move to the next body for consideration. Being voted out of committee favorably means that the majority of the committee members have voted in favor of the bill. As a result, the bill would go to either the house or the senate depending on which member initially proposed the bill. For instance, if a senator proposed the bill it would arrive at the senate first; if a house member proposed the bill it would arrive at that body first. The bill would then have to be voted on favorably in both houses and also receive favorable support from the governor before officially becoming a law. Although this is a long and oftentimes arduous process, it is most likely the only way that this type of policy could be implemented effectively.

The other potential option for this type of proposal might be to send it directly to the state board of education or board of trustees for state-operated colleges and universities in that respective state. Most states at least one of the aforementioned entities. The purpose of these bodies is to oversee the inner-workings of the educational system and come up with ways to enhance best practices in all areas concerning education. In this case, a nontraditional student would contact the offices of the body and attempt to get his or her item on the agenda for a meeting. Once their item is accepted as appropriate for the agenda, the student or students can

explain their position and potentially have their item voted on or opened for a public hearing.

This is where members of the public are invited to speak in favor or opposition to a particular bill or amendment that is being proposed. Usually, members of the body will vote on the item after the public hearing or a short time later.

By using policy as a way to implement their positions, nontraditional students can ensure that the needs of students are legally binding and need to be adhered to. This would be a much more favorable approach than simply having a college administrator assign the liaison duties to a counselor or other individual associated with the academic institution. This is because the liaison position might quickly be defunded if funds are not allocated or not enough students are utilizing the liaison. By having it as a law, or decree by a supervisory body, the position would be more difficult to dissolve without a compelling reason.

Conclusion

The attainment of goals in life is a process that is hardly finite. Whether one's goal is to learn a new skill, revisit an academic subject that he or she enjoyed while in high school, or achieve the American dream, all are relevant and important to nontraditional students. In the end, it appears that nontraditional students arrive on the campuses of colleges and universities with goals, hopes, and long-term aspirations. While their previous paths in life might have been different, they are there for many of the same reasons as other students. With this said, the uniqueness of nontraditional learners lies in their experiences, motivations, and overall needs. So many students now fall under the umbrella of being non-traditional; it is essential that educational leaders and scholars foster an awareness of not only who these students are, but how everyone concerned can provide the best possible experience for individuals who are trying to improve their own lives. As such, an overall understanding of what propels nontraditional

students to attend college, and what might limit them from attending or dropping out, needs to continue to be carefully examined at all levels. While many factors were discussed, analyzed, and explored in this study, the most important factor should be: How can educational leaders continue to expand upon this research in order to help those who need it most?

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Appendix A

Email Inviting Students to Participate in Study

I am sending you this email because you are currently at least the age of 24 and currently taking college classes. I am conducting a study about you and what factors pulled you towards college and those that initially pushed you away from applying.

If you would like to participate in my study, you must be at least 24 years old, and attending an institution of higher education.

Students who meet these criteria and who volunteer to participate in this study will complete both a survey that will take about 10 minutes and an in-person that will take about 60 minutes. Students will receive \$20.00 in cash for participating.

Please review the attached materials, which include the following: *an informed consent form, a description of the study, the four-part survey, and the interview questions.*

Thank you very much for your consideration in participating in this study.

Please feel free to contact me at any time to sign up or for more information. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Patricia Smedley Buxton, at pbuxton@bridgeport.edu

Thank you for your consideration and time!

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Vance
Email:jevance@bridgeport.edu

Appendix B

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study is to find out what factors pulled you towards college and those that initially pushed you away from applying. Your input and ideas are very important to this study and may help administrators and faculty to understand how better to support students, like you, to be successful in college.

This study has two components: the survey and the interview. The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete. It has four parts. The first part is demographic information. The second and third parts deal with the reasons why you might have enrolled in college and the reasons that initially might have held you back from applying. The interview will take about 60 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to talk with you about the reasons why you applied to college and what might have held you back from applying after you graduated high school or attained your GED. I have included the following materials for your review before we meet for the survey and interview:

- Informed Consent Form
- Interview Questions
- Thank You Letter

You will receive \$20.00 in cash for participating in this study even if you decide to stop participating at any time.

You may stop participating in the study at any time for any reason without any negative consequences. Please review the informed consent form for more details on this study.

Thank you very much for volunteering to participate in this study.

Appendix C

Survey on Push and Pull Factors Regarding Nontraditional Students

Explanation:

This questionnaire takes no more than 20 minutes to complete and will be used to gain a better understanding of the factors that pull nontraditional students towards higher education and those factors that push students away from higher education. Your participation is voluntary, and confidential. You may refuse to complete the questionnaire at any point.

Directions:

There are four sections to the questionnaire. Please complete all items. In the first section titled *Demographics*, please mark the response that best describes you. In the second and third sections, titled *Section 2 and 3*, please mark the response that best describes your level of agreement with the item listed in the far-left column. Responses range from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” If an item does not apply to you, please mark “Not Applicable.” In the fourth section, titled *Additional Remarks*, please write any additional information that you feel would be helpful to the researcher.

Section 1: Demographics. Please mark the response the best describes you.

#	Item	1	2	3	4	5
1	Your Gender	Female	Male			
2	Your Age	24 or under	25-34	35-44	45-54	55 or over
3	Your Race/ Ethnicity	White	Latino/ Hispanic	Black/ African American	Asian	Other/ Multiracial
4	How would you describe your total annual household income?	\$0-\$24,999	\$25,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000- \$99,999	\$100,000 and over

5	Do you have a child/ children at home under the age of 12?	Yes	No			
6	Do you have a spouse/ partner/ or significant other who lives with you?	Yes	No			
7	Do you have other relatives who live with you?	Yes	No			
8	Do you have non-relatives who live with you?	Yes	No			
9	Are you employed full-time(i.e., 35 hours or more each week)?	Yes	No			
10	Are you employed part-time(i.e., under 35 hours each week)?	Yes	No			
11	Do you have more than one job?	Yes	No			
12	Are you currently a full- or part-time student?	Yes	No			

PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE

Section 2: - Please mark your level of agreement with each of the following statements. If

the item does not apply to you, please mark “Not Applicable.”

#	Item	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly Disagree	5 Not Applicable
13	A desire for personal accomplishment motivated me to enroll.					
14	A desire to finish a degree that I began but did not complete earlier motivated me to enroll.					
15	A desire for knowledge/ and skills in my major motivated me to enroll.					
16	The assurance of a pay increase at work motivated me to enroll.					
17	The desire to begin a new career motivated me to enroll.					
18	Encouragement from my spouse/ partner/ or significant other motivated me to enroll.					
19	Encouragement from my child/children motivated me to enroll.					

20	Encouragement from my parent(s) motivated me to enroll.					
21	Encouragement from my supervisor or employer motivated me to enroll.					
22	Encouragement from friends who have their degrees motivated me to enroll.					
23	A desire to be a role model for my child/children motivated me to enroll.					
24	A desire for more respect from my peers motivated me to enroll.					
25	A love for learning motivated me to enroll.					
26	The overall program offerings motivated me to enroll.					

PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE

Section 3- Please mark your level of agreement with each of the following statements. If the item does not apply to you, please mark “Not Applicable.”

#	Item	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Disagree	4 Strongly Disagree	5 Not Applicable
27	A lack of confidence in my ability was a barrier to my enrollment.					
28	Concern about attending school with younger or older students was a barrier to my enrollment.					
29	Lack of technological skills was a barrier to my enrollment.					
30	The lack of grants and scholarships for education was a barrier to my enrollment.					
31	The lack of personal funds to pay for college was a barrier to my enrollment.					
32	Concerns about paying back student loans was a barrier to my enrollment.					
33	Discouragement by a spouse/ partner/ or significant other was a barrier to my enrollment.					
34	Discouragement by a parent(s) was a barrier to my enrollment.					
35	Discouragement by my employer					

	was a barrier to my enrollment.					
36	Time away from my job was a barrier to my enrollment.					
37	Lack of childcare was a barrier to my enrollment.					
38	Lack of funds for childcare was a barrier to my enrollment.					
39	Lack of classes at a convenient time was a barrier to my enrollment.					
40	Lack of personal time was a barrier to my enrollment.					

Section 4- Additional Remarks- Please include any additional information that you feel might be important concerning this research.

Appendix D

In-Person Interview Guide

Thank you very much for completing the survey and volunteering to participate in this interview. This interview will last no more than 60 minutes. At any time, you or I may end the interview for any reason. Again, this study is about the reasons why you are currently attending college and the reasons why you did not apply earlier in life.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview. Please know that anything you share with me will be confidential. If at any time you would like me to stop the recording for any reason, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin? May I turn on the recording app.?

[APP IS RECORDING]

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview. Once I have typed up what you said, you can review it if you would like. Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study or interview?

Great. Let's begin.

PUSH FACTORS

- 1) Thinking back to when you attained your high school diploma, why did you not apply to college at that time? **PROMPT FOR SELF ESTEEM-FINANCES**
- 2) Tell me about your experiences working with younger people. Does it concern you that some of the students might be younger than yourself? **PROMPT FOR SELF ESTEEM**

- 3) Do you feel that you have a gap in your knowledge that might require you to work harder in order to become successful in college, why? **PROMPT FOR ACADEMIC INTERESTS, PROMPT FOR ENCOURAGEMENT FROM OTHERS**
- 4) Describe how you feel about yourself. Did any issues concerning self-esteem play a role in your decision not to apply to college at an earlier date? **PROMPT FOR SCHOOL ISSUES, PROMPT FOR CONFIDENCE**
- 5) Concerning work-related issues. Describe your job status at the time you initially decided not to apply to college. Tell me about your current job status. **PROMPT FOR DISCOURAGEMENT AT WORK FROM COWORKERS OR SUPERVISORS/PROMPT FOR DISCOURAGEMENT AT HOME**
- 6) Financially, does the cost of college concern you? Do you have a plan in place with regard to paying for college, please explain? **PROMPT FOR PERSONAL FINANCIAL WORRIES/PROMPT FOR OTHER FINANCIAL BURDENS**
- 7) Describe your ability to work with technology, specifically computers. **PROMPT FOR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH COMPUTERS AND APPLICATIONS AT HOME AND AT WORK**
- 8) What would be most important reason(s) why you might be discouraged from continuing with college? **PROMPT FOR PERSONAL REASON**

PULL FACTORS

- 1) What are some motivations in your life? **PROMPT FOR OVERALL LIFE GOALS**
- 2) Who is a positive person in your life, and why? **PROMPT FOR POSITIVE QUALITIES**
- 3) Do you enjoy learning new things, why? **PROMPT FOR HOBBIES AND INTERESTS**

- 4) Is there anyone in your life who motivated you to apply to college? **PROMPT FOR INDIVIDUAL'S SIGNIFICANCE**
- 5) Is there one significant event that changed your attitude and helped you to decide to apply to college? **PROMPT FOR POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE QUALITIES**
- 6) What are the two or three top reasons about the college and its programs that helped with your decision to apply? **PROMPT FOR PROGRAMS/CLASS AVAILABILITY**
- 7) Does your job play a role in your decision to apply? If so, explain? **PROMPT FOR EMPLOYER SUPPORT**
- 8) What would be the most important reason(s) why you decided to apply to college at this point in your life? **PROMPT FOR FINANCE/ JOB SECURITY/ LOVE OF LEARNING**

APPENDIX E

Debriefing Email for Students Who Participated in the Study

Dear Students:

Thank you very much for volunteering to participate in this study. I appreciate your time, thoughtfulness, and focus that you gave to this study. Again, this study is about what factors pulled you towards college and those that initially pushed you away from applying. The findings of this study may help other college students, like you, to receive supports that can help them to achieve academic success.

If you would like a copy of the typed transcription of your interview, please let me know, and I will email it to you.

If you have any other questions about the study, please feel free to contact me, or you may contact my research advisor, Dr. Patricia Smedley Buxton, at pbuxton@bridgeport.edu

It was a pleasure to meet you and talk with you about your college experiences. Thank you again for volunteering to participate in this important study. I wish you the very best with the rest of your college career and beyond.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Vance

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of research study: A Qualitative Study as to the Reasons Why Nontraditional Students Attend College at a Later Point in Their Lives

Investigator: **Jeffrey Vance**

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are at least 24 years old and are taking classes at an institution of higher learning. What you should know about a research study:

Someone will explain this research study to you.

You volunteer to be in a research study.

Whether or not you take part is up to you.

You can choose not to take part in the research study.

You can agree to take part now and later change your mind.

Whatever you decide, it will not be held against you.

Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, please contact the research team at pbuxton@bridgeport.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to the IRB Co-Chair at (203) 576-4141 or irb@bridgeport.edu about any of the following:

Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

You cannot reach the research team.

You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

You have questions about your rights as a research subject.

You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why are you doing this research?

The purpose for this qualitative multi-case study is to determine why nontraditional students have chosen to attend college at a later point in their lives. The intent of the study is to, through in-depth interviews and surveys, allow for nontraditional students to describe their overall reasons for applying to college later in life. This process will yield relevant data for institutions of higher learning in determining what factors are at play when nontraditional students are making the decision to apply for college. Results of this study will help institutions of higher learning improve upon what they are already doing well and improve upon those areas that nontraditional students find problematic.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for approximately one month.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about 10 people will be in the research study.

What happens if I say, “Yes, I want to be in this research?”

The selected participants would be surveyed and interviewed at a mutually convenient time. The interviews and surveys will take place in locations selected by the participant. The participant would arrive at the arranged time and take the survey and respond to the interview questions. The participant would each be paid \$20 cash for his or her participation.

What happens if I say, “No, I do not want to be in this research?”

You may decide not to take part in the research, and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You agree to take part in the research now. You may stop at any time, and it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

No major concerns. Some questions deal with personal reasons for not attending college. However, the participant may reveal only information with which he or she is comfortable.

Will being in this study help me any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include a better understanding of what helps nontraditional students become more successful.

What happens to the information you collect?

Efforts will be made to limit your personal information only to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for your removal may include you not falling in the valid age range or you not currently being enrolled in college during the study.

Signature Block for Capable Adult: Long Form

Your signature below documents your permission to take part in this research.

DO NOT SIGN THIS FORM AFTER

→

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Jeffrey Vance

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Form Date

DO NOT SIGN THIS FORM AFTER

→

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Form Date

APPENDIX G

EMAIL GRANTING PERMISSION FOR SURVEY

Jeffrey,

I'm responding to your query regarding the use of the Motivations and Barriers survey:

My colleagues (listed in the email above) and I are glad that you can use the survey, and we give our unrestricted permission for its use in your doctoral research.

We would be grateful if you send us the executive summary of your research when complete. Our best to you as you complete your Ph.D.

--

Sara B. Kimmel, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Business



APPENDIX H

CITI FORM



Completion Date 31-Jul-2017
Expiration Date 30-Jul-2020
Record ID 24034155

This is to certify that:

Jeffrey Vance

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Bridgeport

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w904e2466-5327-45f2-8540-dec58c6cab55-24034155